

Satipaṭṭhāna (50) The Third Aggregate: Concepts

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We are in the fourth foundation of mindfulness, looking at mindfulness of the five aggregates (or the five groups) of clinging – the five ways in which we take our whole experience as human beings and cling. According to the Buddha, when we cling to almost anything, we are actually clinging to one of these five areas. This is not quite who we are, but anything at all can fit into these categories.

As we talked about many weeks ago, the refrain of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* shows the direction in which mindfulness practice is going. It points to a place where we see the inconstant nature of our experience – the flow of experience, the appearing and disappearing of experience. The repeated emphasis on the rising and passing of experience is an alternative to being stuck – being caught up in some thought, idea, concept, or feeling. It is an alternative to clinging.

If a river is flowing and you want to stop it by grabbing it or blocking it with your hands, that will not work – the river keeps flowing. As you try to block the river, you feel the stress of trying to hold it back. But if we can appreciate that what the river does is flow, then we might allow ourselves to be carried by it. We can allow ourselves to float along in the current of the river. We can go far, and maybe we can eventually make it to the great peaceful ocean.

It is the same way with our experience. It is much more fluid and changeable than our concepts tell us it is. Concepts and ideas – when we cling to them, hold on to them, or are obsessed with them – provide a sense of continuity, a kind of constancy, both to what we think is there, and to what we think is going on. We think we can cling. We think it works to cling. But when we see that these concepts and ideas are part of the river of change, we can learn to float on them. We do not reject the concepts, but we can see their fluid, inconstant nature.

Of the five aggregates – the five heaps or five groups – the third one is *saññā*. It is usually translated into English as “perception,” but I do not think that is an appropriate translation. I think the word “perception” implies a non-conceptual perception: seeing, hearing, tasting – how we perceive at the different sense doors. The word *saññā* has the meaning of “to mark something, to label it.” It is the simple concept we have of things. There are some things we see that we do not have any concept for. We might not even have a word for them, so we might say, “It’s something – just something.”

Some of these concepts are very fluid and changeable. I have here this wonderful bowl or bell. We can call it a bell, but if I didn’t have a bowl to eat my breakfast with, this would make a perfect bowl. Rather than using it as a bell, it could become a bowl – my breakfast bowl or my soup bowl. Or maybe I don’t need the bell anymore, but I have a lot of pens, so it could become a pen holder. The pens could all sit in there. Or it could become some other type of holder. What this object is, is changeable. It could be a flowerpot.

We often label it by its function. The concept we have of things is functional, and the function can change, so the label changes. This points to the idea that concepts are fluid and changeable. They are not absolute. They are relative, provisional, and situational.

It is the same way with our ideas of safety, well-being, happiness, and suffering. These ideas appear as simple concepts we get caught in. We can then get involved in associations, complicated stories, and ideas about them.

So, to be mindful of *saññā* – of these simple concepts (I prefer to translate *saññā* as “concepts”) – gives us a vantage point to be wise about how we can get swept away by the more complicated ideas we have.

As practice deepens, we start seeing that all the concepts we have – as concepts, as ideas, as the recognizing function of the mind – are there for a very, very brief time. Then they appear again, and again. If I make up the sentence, “I am speaking words,” each of those words is a concept: “I...am...speaking...words.” When we speed read, it all blurs together into one large concept, and we understand the overall meaning. But we can step back and see, feel, or recognize the individuality of each of those words before we string them together and make them into the larger meaning: “I am speaking words.”

In ordinary life, we cannot go around paying this kind of detailed attention to concepts all the time. It is just not efficient. It is efficient to string words together in a sentence and get the meaning right away. But as meditation quiets the mind and we become stiller, there are times when we can see the exquisite appearance of a concept. Sometimes when I open my eyes at the end of a meditation, before I have a concept there is seeing, but there is not quite recognition yet. There is a shape or a color – there is something briefly. Then I can feel or see or recognize that my mind creates a concept.

Right now, I am looking at my laptop – “Oh, laptop.” There is a little gap between what I would call “perception” – just taking in the sense data, the sight object without the concept – and the recognition of the overlay of the concept on top of the sense data. I might see a bell like this one. And as I pointed out, it does not have to be a bell – it could be a bowl, a pen holder, all kinds of things – a flowerpot.

Because all those things are not inherent in the object, it is possible to see the object without the label and then see the label arise in the mind – see the thought arise, “bell.” It can be exquisite to see that, rather than just having it happen on automatic pilot. To see the brilliance of the mind that makes these concepts, and see the concept arise without any clinging, holding on, grasping, or any kind of extra baggage. Just “bell,” “bowl.”

In deep meditation – in quiet, still meditation – the exquisiteness gets more and more special. We are down at the primary, primal level of experience. We see the arising – the beginning – of this complicated world we live in. But we are not seduced by the complicated world. We can see it as just the arising of a concept that gives birth to other concepts and ideas. We can just stay there watching it appear and dissolve, come and go. It can be as delightful as sitting on a riverbank watching the river go by – maybe spending long periods just watching the flow of the current, the little waves, the flow. It is very relaxing and nice to see that.

In the same way, it is possible to see the current, the river of concepts as they appear. We can use these concepts a little bit in mindfulness practice to help us stay present. This is the purpose of a mental label with which we repeat the concept. Maybe the concept is almost subconscious when it first appears, but then we use a mental note to recognize: “river,” if we are looking at a river; “in” as we breathe in; “out” as we breathe out; “warm,” if we feel warm; “restless,” if we feel restless.

This is a way of using a little bit more emphatic note. It is a bit more intentional. It is a way of staying in the flow of the present moment – being right there, being right there, being right there with it – letting it just flow and move through as it does.

As we do this, we begin to let go of clinging. As we let go of clinging in a deeper and deeper way, at some point, the flow of experience does not get limited by the particular groupings of the five aggregates because that itself is a concept.

As the Buddha says, each of the five aggregates are concepts the mind has produced. These concepts begin to dissolve because they are secondary concepts – they are more abstract concepts. They dissolve and then, at some point, awareness doesn’t remain as selective – focused on one aspect of our experience. Awareness becomes more panoramic. Awareness is simply here and present in a panoramic way. We are just in the flow of experience without segmenting it into these five groups.

As you go about your day today, see if you can notice the arising of concepts and their provisional nature – their fluid nature – what is sometimes called their “empty nature.” Or notice the opposite. Notice how concepts can seem so solid, real, and important – “it has to be this way.” Notice what we add to these simple concepts as they appear in the mind. Thank you very much. We will continue tomorrow.