

Satipaṭṭhāna (52) The Fifth Aggregate: Consciousness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

knowing, Buddha, recognition, *saññā*, beans, clinging, sense, emphasize, mental functioning, construct, counterfeit coin, differentiate, grouping, concept, *khandha*, *viññāṇa*, understanding, separate

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We have arrived at the fifth and final talk on the five groupings (the five *khandha* or aggregates). This is an exercise in the discourse on the Four Foundations for Awareness – for cultivating a lucid, clear, present moment awareness. The last *khandha* is usually translated into English as “consciousness.”

I think that this is very likely not the best choice as an English translation because very few people know what consciousness is, and few of those who study consciousness can agree about it. There are many different opinions, ideas, and efforts to try to pin down what consciousness is.

Interestingly enough, consciousness was only a subject of study for the last 200 years or so. The modern usage of the word consciousness is relatively recent. Many different ideas and associations have gathered around that concept.

The Pali word is *viññāṇa*. This word existed in India before the Buddha. Many translators of the ancient Hindu Upanishadic texts translate it as “understanding” or “intellect.” The Buddha very rarely defines it. It is possible that the word *viññāṇa* is used in different ways in different contexts, which makes it more difficult to pin down what it is.

In the five *khandha* (five aggregates), *viññāṇa* seems to mean a knowing that differentiates. If you are looking down at a bowl full of mixed beans – red beans, black beans, white beans, pinto beans – to know is the ability to recognize the distinct kinds of beans from each other. It means to separate out. Rather than one big blur of beans, we separate out: this, this, this, this. The Buddha talked about consciousness as that which differentiates between salty and not salty, bitter and sweet.

This meaning is not very satisfying for a modern English audience that has a more grand idea of what consciousness is. *Viññāṇa* seems to be a heightened knowing or clarity, where we know what is happening with more understanding. It is a clear knowing of direct experience. *Viññāṇa* is related to the third aggregate, *saññā*, or recognition, the concepts we have. But *viññāṇa* might be more primitive – prior to the concepts we add on top of things.

An ancient analogy for *viññāṇa* compares a child who is given a counterfeit coin and simply recognizes it as a coin without realizing it is counterfeit, with a merchant who is an expert in how people counterfeit coins and will immediately recognize it as counterfeit. The recognition that it is a coin is there, but it is heightened with the clarity of knowing it is not real.

The Buddha talked about six kinds of consciousness. There is knowing through seeing, knowing through hearing, knowing through smelling, knowing through tasting, knowing through a tactile experience of the body, and knowing what is going on in the mind. Rather than calling them all knowing, they are viewed as six distinct kinds of knowing: the six consciousnesses or six *viññāṇa*.

This meaning of *viññāṇa* is in contrast to how some meditators and spiritual traditions will view consciousness: as a continuous, unitary field of knowing – the idea that consciousness is always there. Everything is coming and going, everything is impermanent, but it is all occurring on a screen that is always there. Or they see consciousness as like the ocean, and everything else is just the rain falling on the ocean – temporarily there. The waves come and go on the ocean, but the ocean itself is always there. Just under the surface, it is vast, still, and quiet.

The Buddha seems not to have emphasized this kind of consciousness whatsoever. In fact, I believe the Theravāda and early Buddhist understanding of this would be that the mind is a constructing activity. Whatever consciousness is, as emphasized in the fifth aggregate, it is part of this constructed activity. It is not innate. It is not inherent. It is not always there. It does not go from one life to another. It is another thing that comes and goes, arises and passes.

In its arising, consciousness is partly a construct of mental functioning. It is a condition of mental functioning, as opposed to something that is independent of the vagaries and changing nature of the mind itself. In the fifth exercise of *Satipaṭṭhāna* on the aggregates, what the meditator is meant to see is that this consciousness, or this knowing, appears and disappears, appears and passes away. We are looking at something that is changeable, impermanent, and inconstant.

What kind of consciousness is that way? What kind of knowing? How is that different from recognition? I suggested in the guided meditation that it is very simple but very clear. There is a knowing that knows all the other aggregates. It knows there is a sensation. It knows there is a feeling tone. It knows that there is recognition happening at this moment. It knows that there are mental constructs happening. And it knows that it knows.

You can get caught up in an infinite regress of knowing – knowing that I know that I know – but do not bother with that. Just keep it very simple and relaxed. With this kind of knowing, when a sound arises, there is a knowing of the sound that arises with the sound. When the sound goes away, maybe the knowing goes. (Or if we get distracted by something else, maybe the knowing goes away faster.)

We see something; we hear; we taste something; we touch something; we think something; we feel something. With each, there is a simple knowing that arises. The important point is not to know exactly what consciousness is. Rather, whatever way in which we know, the point is to recognize that it comes and goes. It is not constant. It is not permanent. As we start seeing its inconstant nature, then we will not cling to it. That is the hope and the direction we are going.

Consciousness can also be an object of clinging. Sometimes people can easily let go of all things except consciousness, if they are strongly identified with consciousness as being their true self. “This is who I am.” “This is how I survive.” “This is how I will always exist,” or something similar.

The deeper Vipassana practice goes, the less we can recognize or find any continuous, ever-present field of consciousness. Everything is seen in its momentary aspect, coming and going. Whether there is a consciousness that persists over time – that, in a sense, is not so interesting for early Buddhism to specify. What is important is that, as we practice more deeply, we will not find it in our direct experience. That does not mean we decide there is none. It just means we do not find it.

The purpose for not finding it is so that we will let go of clinging to it. We are trying to let go of all clinging. The functional aspect of this practice is all about the end of clinging – not to come to a philosophical conclusion about what consciousness is or is not.

In terms of what consciousness is or is not, what I am talking about today just barely scratches the surface of a fascinating concept. I hope that it gives you just enough information about practice to begin to appreciate the miracle of knowing in simple ways – knowing hearing, seeing, tasting, touching, smelling, and the mind. And then seeing how objects or experiences arise in these six sense doors. They come and go, and the knowing of them comes and goes. Sometimes the knowing comes and goes faster than the object. That knowing can be very relaxed and easeful, just being with what is obvious, free of all the self-referencing where we get tripped up, get caught, and suffer. We are pointing here to a simplicity of being with all our senses. All our experience is very simple and free.

We have three more exercises to do before we finish this fourth foundation of mindfulness. Next week, we will do the six sense bases and the fetters, the knots, that get formed around them. Thank you.