

Satipaṭṭhāna (51) The Fourth Aggregate: Mental Constructs

March 31, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

IMC bell, stories, selecting, recognize, construct, recognition, aggregates, appearance, constructions, unpleasant, sensation, experience, pleasant, ideas, groupings, elaboration, *saṅkhāra*

Gil Fronsdal

We are talking about this important topic that appears often in the teachings of the Buddha. Sometimes it is presented in ways that are hard for modern people to identify with or appreciate. I think that these teachings on the five aggregates – groupings or divisions of our human experience – might be easier to appreciate as a story. That is a bit paradoxical, since part of the purpose of this teaching is to help us come to the end of stories or appreciate a different way of being.

The story of these five aggregates, five groupings, begins with the direct sensory experience of things. The Pali word can mean “appearances.” Just like in English the word “appearance” means “what comes into view.” But this can be extended to be any sensation that comes into experience, anything we sense. It is the raw sense data from which we build our understanding of the world.

In the understanding of Buddhist psychology, once a sensation, sense data, has come, the next detail that becomes apparent is the pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant or unpleasant feeling of it. There is some idea that this simple, amoeba-like being for or against, or pleasant/unpleasant, is very basic. It occurs almost immediately after taking in a sensation, before we necessarily even recognize what it is.

We often react to the pleasant/unpleasant. It might be that the recognition knows, “This is terrible.” “This is uncomfortable.” Or, “This is wonderful.” That is the simple act of recognition, the third step. It could be recognizing what the object is. I was talking earlier about the meditation bell we have here. I see it. It is a pleasant sight. And I recognize it as a bell. We have to appreciate that the recognition does not live in the object. The recognition is often a construct, a very simple application or projection onto the thing. In this case, by its function. It is operating as a bell, so we call it a bell.

Many years ago in San Francisco, I saw a homeless person who was asking for money. He had a beautiful Japanese bell. I was surprised at how beautiful it was, kind of like this bell here that I have. He was going around asking for donations. I said, “Oh, now the bell is a begging bowl.”

Those are the first three of the aggregates: the appearance of sensations; experiencing it as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; and building on that, recognition. The recognition is usually just one word – a simple label, an idea of what it is, a concept.

Once we have a simple concept of recognition, an elaboration occurs. That elaboration can be a story or some construct that is more than just the object itself that we are recognizing. I see the bell here and recognize it as IMC’s bell. I remember the person who gave it to us many years ago. I recall where the person gave it to us and what inspired the person to give it to us. I remember the person’s name and my appreciation for that person. I begin wondering what has happened to that person, and I feel warmth for this person. There is all this construction, this elaboration, that arises in the wake of having recognized this as a bell.

That is innocent enough. It adds to the richness of life to have stories and histories like that. But it is also a place where life can get unnecessarily complicated. A lot of human suffering is born in these elaborations that happen, constructions that happen after basic recognition.

Once all these things come together – appearance, pleasant/unpleasant, recognition, and constructions of stories and ideas around it – there is the fifth aggregate, which we will talk about tomorrow. Usually, in English, it

is called consciousness. In the flow of my story, consciousness is not prior to all the rest of it. It actually arises in the wake of the others. We will talk about that tomorrow.

The fourth aggregate, the fourth grouping, is usually translated into English as “mental formations.” The Pali word is *saṅkhāra*. The *saṅ* means “with,” and *khāra* is related to karma – “to make,” “to do,” or “to form something.” That is why people say “formations.” I like the word “constructions.” It does not say “mental” in it, but that is by implication. It has to do with the mind – the mental constructions, elaborations, and stories – and how we build the world we live in. Some of it is built collectively, and some of it is built by our own projections onto people, things, and ideas.

This world of constructions has something to do with our inclinations, biases, preferences, motivations, sense of purpose, and fears. It is a huge world that is part of the mental landscape we live in. Often we do not recognize it as such. Not only do we think that the object we recognize (third aggregate) is really what it is, we are attached to the idea we have of it.

I can get attached to this being a bell here at IMC. If someone wanted to use it as a trashcan, I would feel, “What? I’m not so sure about that.” I would like to keep it as a bell – keep it clean and things like that. There are these stories around it, constructs around it – the IMC bell, keeping it clean, what it means for a meditation center to have a clean bell. Some of that is normal, but some of it can be not only the world of constructs but also the world of clinging.

What is fascinating in these teachings of the Buddha is that this constructing aspect of the mind is what constructs the other groupings. The appearance of things is partly born not innocently, not solely because something comes, but partly because we have an apparatus that selects that out of the environment. Of all the things we could pay attention to, there is a selection process that makes this important, and we are selecting this. Likewise, we are selecting the feelings, the feeling tones. We are selecting the recognition. More often we are selecting the constructions themselves. For the Buddha, each of the five aggregates is a construction made by the constructing activity of the mind.

Many times in the West, teachers will say that the Buddha said there is no self, and what there is, are these five aggregates, five heaps. The Buddha did not actually say that. He actually saw the five heaps more as the problem. He called all five of them a burden.

How I understand that statement is that the constructing activity of the mind selects out of the suchness of experience, the simplicity of experience, certain things to prioritize. In some ways, it is necessary to do that. But there is an extraneousness that comes with it and creates a lot of clinging, suffering, and burden in this world. It is very different if we simply rest in the suchness of things, and allow things to be as they are. Almost as if we do not need to get involved in the appearance, feelings, ideas, or stories around it. We are there in a very simple way.

So, you can say as I did, there is a story: appearance, feeling tones, simple recognition, elaboration and stories. What is interesting for mindfulness practitioners is the possibility of going backward – to recognize that we are involved in storytelling, the elaborations by the mind, and then be curious. “Can I just recognize that that’s happening with a simple possible recognition, ‘thinking, story making’?” And then step back further – “Is that pleasant or unpleasant to be thinking and telling stories?” Then we take one more step back, “What are the actual sensations that come along with it?” Maybe there is pressure, tightness, maybe some pleasantness and warmth in thinking about it.

What we are doing is going back to what is primary or foundational, to get grounded there. By taking a stand on the simplicity of experience, we are less likely to be swept away in the currents of this elaborate thinking. Sometimes we can watch from the initial appearance as things get more complicated into stories. Sometimes we can trace it backwards to the basic, simple sensations that are there.

That is fascinating to be able to play the scales, mindfulness scales, back and forth. In doing that, you start appreciating that each of these five aggregates (four so far) are experiences that have a genesis – they arise, appear and disappear, come and go, appear and cease. It is possible to begin being in the flow, the current of these things. That is much closer to the suchness of them, than to select and hold on to any one from the general flow of the river.

I hope that made sense. Tomorrow's topic, the last aggregate, I think is very interesting for many people, when we call it "consciousness." We will take a look at what this is for the Buddha. Thank you, and I look forward to tomorrow.