

The Five Aggregates

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One of the basic principles in the Buddha's teachings is that you try to make the best use of what you've got. So as you sit here with your eyes closed, what have you got? You've got the body sitting here breathing and you've got the mind thinking and aware.

So you bring them together. There are all kinds of things you could do with this body sitting here breathing and with the mind thinking and aware. You could think about the past, you could think about the future, you could give rise to greed, aversion and, delusion.

Or you can turn these things into concentration. Take the body as the object of your meditation. Use the breath to create feelings of ease, feelings of comfort. Think about the breath, picture it to yourself: That's *sañña*, or perception. Direct your thoughts and your evaluation to the breath: Directed thought and evaluation are *sankharas*, fabrications. And be conscious of what you're doing.

In other words, you take these five khandhas, these five aggregates that you've got sitting here and you put them to good use. You turn them away from being piles of "you" or "yours"—things to weigh you down—and you turn them into the path.

This is a very basic principle in the teaching. All too often we take these things and try to make a sense of self out of them. You identify with your thoughts, you identify with your feelings, you identify with your body. And as you identify with them, you cling to them, hold onto them, and they turn into piles—that's one of the meanings of the word, *khandha*: piles, bundles, heaps of things you carry around on top of your shoulders.

And what do you get out of them? They just weigh you down. The more you cling to them, the more you suffer. They're not at fault. It's your clinging that's at fault. They in and of themselves are perfectly fine.

If you were to ask the body, "Do you want to stay alive?" The body's indifferent. If you were asking feelings, "Would you rather be pleasant or painful?" The feelings are indifferent. They could be anything at all. And so on down with all the other khandhas.

It's our wants and desires that say, "This has to be like that. That has to be like this." But do those things follow our wishes? Sometimes, to some extent, but they're not totally under our control. This is what gives rise to the suffering and pain we feel as we keep grabbing after them.

Now, when you look at the khandhas, it's important to realize that they're not *things*, they're functions, they're activities. Even the body, which is the

closest one to being a thing: When you look at it very carefully, you see that there's a lot of activity going on in there: the properties of earth, water, fire, and wind and what they do. They function. They're not just solid lumps sitting here. They move. They get provoked and they change.

Even more so with the mental aggregates: They're constantly changing all the time, functioning in this way, functioning in that way.

The Buddha compares them to mirages, bubbles, things with no real substance. Just as we try to grab onto them, they slip between our fingers. So we keep grabbing, grabbing, grabbing. A thought arises, a feeling arises and we try to grab onto it—but it's gone. It's just slipped through our fingers.

So the question is, what are you going to do with these functions?

There's an interesting spot where the Buddha talks about the functions of the different khandhas, and one of them, fabrication, is the most basic. Because, he says, our experience of all the khandhas depends on fabrication.

There's a potential for form, a potential for feeling, for perceptions, for fabrication, for consciousness, coming from our past actions. But for the actual experience of these things to happen in the present moment, you have to fabricate them a little bit more.

Which means that there's an intentional aspect to all your experience. Whatever you experience has to have a certain amount of intention here in the present moment. Otherwise, there wouldn't be the experience. And it's precisely this fact that opens the way for the path. You can change the way you intend to experience these things. You can turn them into piles of self that are weighing you down or you can turn them into a path.

It's like taking the piles of cement or sand or bricks or whatever you've got on your shoulders, putting them down, and making pavement so that you can walk on them. You make them into a path to the unfabricated.

So that's what we do as we meditate: We change our intention toward the khandhas. Instead of saying, "I'm going to grab onto this as 'me' or 'mine,'" you can say, "I'm trying to make this into a path to something beyond it."

You start out with simple things like the breath, which is a part of the form aggregate. Tell yourself, "I'm going to make this an object for concentration rather than an object for self-identification."

There still may be some clinging there but it's not nearly as strong or as harmful as when you just sit there thinking, "I want this to be 'me', I want this to be 'mine,'" because once it's me or mine you say, "Oh, I want this body to stay young. I want it to stay healthy. I want it to stay like this, stay like that." But it doesn't stay. It keeps changing.

So instead of fighting the changing, you make use of it. The breath is the change of the body. It's happening all the time, so you focus on that. Say, "I want to make this a path, an object of right concentration." That changes your

intentionality toward the body.

And the same with feelings as they arise: When you're working on concentration, your intention is to nurture the feelings of pleasure you can create from the path, but to let other feelings go, to let them pass without getting involved with them. When you're working with insight, you want to look at feelings a little bit more deeply. But you've got to base that insight practice on good solid concentration. Otherwise, you just start getting entangled and soon you find yourself getting back with your old intentions.

It's like an addiction. You have to be really careful around the things you used to be addicted to.

So in the very beginning you try to just let the other feelings pass, let the other thoughts pass. Then, when your concentration is strong enough, you can look at them and have a little more trust in your intentionality: What are your intentions toward these feelings? You want to observe them to gain insight: insight into where your attachments are, where your craving is, where your clinging is.

So the fact that our present experience has to have an element of intentionality is what opens the path. That way, we can take these khandhas—which are the basic raw materials available to us—and intentionally turn them into something useful rather than into a burden.

So try to look at all the things with which you tend to identify and realize that that identification is not something that comes as a given in the khandhas themselves. They don't come labeled as "me" or "mine," "my" feelings, "my" emotions: The label's not there. You're the one who pastes the label on. And once you've placed the label on, then you've got trouble.

But if you realize that they come just as potentials and you can turn them either into a pile of bricks on your shoulders or you can turn them into brick pavement under your feet, then you see that you've got your choice.

As you practice, you take the latter choice—until you reach the point where you don't need the path anymore. Up to that point, though, there's still a lot to be done.

When the Buddha talks about using the khandhas as part of the path, there are basically three stages.

One is like what we just said: Turn them into a path for concentration. As with the body here: The breath is the object of the concentration. You're trying to develop feelings of pleasure. You have the perception of the breath, perceiving the whole body as part of the breath energy; the fabrication of directed thought and evaluation; and then the consciousness that follows along and is aware of these things. That's Step One.

Step Two, once the concentration is good and strong, is that you look at it to see that even in this very subtle concentration there are still problems.

There's still some stress. There's still some clinging.

And so you analyze the concentration into aggregates again. You work at perceiving these things as not-self, stressful, not-self, changing all the time. These are perceptions, of course, are aggregates, too. And how do you develop these perceptions?

The Buddha gives an example. He says to start asking questions about them. "This form that I'm so attached to: Is it constant or inconstant?" You look at it and see that it changes. "These things that are inconstant, are they stressful or pleasant?" Well, you see the stress involved in them as you try to cling to them. "And with things that are stressful and inconstant, is it really appropriate to say, 'This is me, this is mine, this is myself?'" Well, no.

You can ask this question on an ordinary level where it just doesn't do anything much, or it gives temporary help. But as you get into deeper, deeper levels of concentration and look at the places where you're attached even there—where there still is some subtle suffering, subtle stress even in those states of concentration that you really, really like—then the realization of not-self goes a lot deeper. The sense of dispassion, the sense of disenchantment with the whole thing goes a lot deeper and enables you to let go.

Now, this process of questioning: That's fabrication, the fabrication of appropriate attention. So you learn to ask these questions, you learn to develop these perceptions. Again, they're part of the path. But still they're khandhas themselves.

The final break is when you incline the mind to the deathless, to the unfabricated. Here again, you start out by using perceptions to remind yourself that there is an escape. If you don't remind yourself of this escape, the contemplation of not-self and stress and inconstancy gets pretty depressing.

You've got to remind yourself that there is a way out. So you use your perceptions to incline the mind toward the way out. And then when you hit it, then you can let go of all the khandhas. That's when you've used the khandhas for their best purpose.

So there are three stages in taking these burdens that tend to weigh you down and turning them into a path that you can walk along—until you can take off. It's like turning the road into a runway. You finally take off. You don't need a path anymore. They say of people who are fully awakened that their path is like the path of birds through space. It can't be traced. You can talk about the path leading up to awakening but beyond that point there's no path at all. You're totally free.

I remember thinking about this at Ajaan Suwat's funeral. The morning after the cremation, they had a tiny little table set up next to the crematorium. And on it was a little pile of bones covered with cloth: about a foot long, half a foot wide, just a few inches tall. And that was it. That was all that was left of his

body.

But I kept thinking about how he had used his body as opposed to how most people use their body. He'd taken these khandhas and had put them to good use. There was no sense of sorrow, no sense of loss, just a sense of a job well-done, the work completed.

So think about your body. What use are you going to get out of it in this lifetime? Will you just use it to create more suffering for yourself, to develop more unskillful habits? Or are you going to use it as a path to liberation?—so that when you finally leave it, you can leave it with your job done.

That's the choice facing all of us. It's a question of how you're going to dedicate your life—which use of the body, which use of feelings and all the other aggregates you find most inspiring.

And then ask yourself: What's getting in the way of your using it for that inspiring purpose? Then find your way around those obstacles.

There's no better use for your body, no better use for your feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications and consciousness—no better use than this.