

The Five Aggregates

Part I - Introduction



Sutta and the City

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Selections from Khandhasamyutta:
Connected Discourses on the Aggregates

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47. Ways of Regarding Things

At Sāvattthī. “Bhikkhus, those ascetics and brahmins who regard [anything as] self in various ways all regard [as self] the five aggregates subject to clinging, or a certain one among them. What five?

“Here, bhikkhus, the uninstructed worldling, who is not a seer of the noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who is not a seer of superior persons and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. He regards feeling as self ... perception as self ... volitional formations as self ... consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness.

“Thus this way of regarding things and [the notion] ‘I am’ have not vanished in him. As ‘I am’ has not vanished, there takes place a descent of the five faculties—of the eye faculty, the ear faculty, the nose faculty, the tongue faculty, the body faculty. There is, bhikkhus, the mind, there are mental phenomena, there is the element of ignorance. When the uninstructed worldling is contacted by a feeling born of ignorance-contact, ‘I am’ occurs to him; ‘I am this’ occurs to him; ‘I will be’ and ‘I will not be,’ and ‘I will consist of form’ and ‘I will be formless,’ and ‘I will be percipient’ and ‘I will be nonpercipient’ and ‘I will be neither percipient nor nonpercipient’—these occur to him.

“The five faculties remain right there, bhikkhus, but in regard to them the instructed noble disciple abandons ignorance and arouses true knowledge. With the fading away of ignorance and the arising of true knowledge, ‘I am’ does not occur to him; ‘I am this’ does not occur to him; ‘I will be’ and ‘I will not be,’ and ‘I will consist of form’ and ‘I will be formless,’ and ‘I will be percipient’ and ‘I will be nonpercipient’ and ‘I will be neither percipient nor nonpercipient’—these do not occur to him.”

43. With Yourselves as an Island

At Sāvattthī. “Bhikkhus, dwell with yourselves as an island, with yourselves as a refuge, with no other refuge; with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as a refuge, with no other refuge. When you dwell with yourselves as an island, with yourselves as a refuge, with no other refuge; with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as a refuge, with no other refuge, the basis itself should be investigated thus: ‘From what are sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair born? How are they produced?’

“And, bhikkhus, from what are sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair born? How are they produced? Here, bhikkhus, the uninstructed worldling, who is not a seer of the noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who is not a seer of superior persons and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. That form of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of form, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.

“He regards feeling as self ... perception as self ... volitional

formations as self ... consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. That consciousness of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of consciousness, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.

“But, bhikkhus, when one has understood the impermanence of form, its change, fading away, and cessation, and when one sees as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘In the past and also now all form is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change,’ then sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair are abandoned. With their abandonment, one does not become agitated. Being unagitated, one dwells happily. A bhikkhu who dwells happily is said to be quenched in that respect.

“When one has understood the impermanence of feeling ... of perception ... of volitional formations ... of consciousness, its change, fading away, and cessation, and when one sees as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘In the past and also now all consciousness is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change,’ then sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair are abandoned.

With their abandonment, one does not become agitated. Being unagitated, one dwells happily. A bhikkhu who dwells happily is said to be quenched in that respect.”

79. Being Devoured

At Sāvattthī. “Bhikkhus, those ascetics and brahmins who recollect their manifold past abodes all recollect the five aggregates subject to clinging or a certain one among them. What five?

“When recollecting thus, bhikkhus: ‘I had such form in the past,’ it is just form that one recollects. When recollecting: ‘I had such a feeling in the past,’ it is just feeling that one recollects. When recollecting: ‘I had such a perception in the past,’ it is just perception that one recollects. When recollecting: ‘I had such volitional formations in the past,’ it is just volitional formations that one recollects. When recollecting: ‘I had such consciousness in the past,’ it is just consciousness that one recollects.

“And why, bhikkhus, do you call it form? ‘It is deformed,’ bhikkhus, therefore it is called form. Deformed by what? Deformed by cold, deformed by heat, deformed by hunger, deformed by thirst, deformed by contact with flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and serpents. ‘It is deformed,’ bhikkhus, therefore it is called form.

“And why, bhikkhus, do you call it feeling? ‘It feels,’ bhikkhus, therefore it is called feeling. And what does it feel? It feels pleasure, it feels pain, it feels neither-pain-nor-pleasure. ‘It feels,’ bhikkhus, therefore it is called feeling.

“And why, bhikkhus, do you call it perception? ‘It perceives,’ bhikkhus, therefore it is called perception. And what does it perceive? It perceives blue, it perceives yellow, it perceives red, it perceives white. ‘It perceives,’ bhikkhus, therefore it is called perception.

“And why, bhikkhus, do you call them volitional formations? ‘They construct the conditioned,’ bhikkhus, therefore they are called volitional formations.

And what is the conditioned that they construct? They construct conditioned form as form; they construct conditioned feeling as feeling; they construct conditioned perception as perception; they construct conditioned volitional formations as volitional formations; they construct

conditioned consciousness as consciousness. ‘They construct the conditioned,’ bhikkhus, therefore they are called volitional formations.

“And why, bhikkhus, do you call it consciousness? ‘It cognizes,’ bhikkhus, therefore it is called consciousness. And what does it cognize? It cognizes sour, it cognizes bitter, it cognizes pungent, it cognizes sweet, it cognizes sharp, it cognizes mild, it cognizes salty, it cognizes bland. ‘It cognizes,’ bhikkhus, therefore it is called consciousness.

“Therein, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple reflects thus: ‘I am now being devoured by form. In the past too I was devoured by form in the very same way that I am now being devoured by present form. If I were to seek delight in future form, then in the future too I shall be devoured by form in the very same way that I am now being devoured by present form.’ Having reflected thus, he becomes indifferent towards past form, he does not seek delight in future form, and he is practising for revulsion towards present form, for its fading away and cessation.

“[He reflects thus:] ‘I am now being devoured by feeling.’ ... ‘I am now being devoured by perception.’ ... ‘I am now being devoured by volitional formations.’ ... ‘I am now being devoured by consciousness. In the past too I was devoured by consciousness in the very same way that I am now being devoured by present consciousness. If I were to seek delight in future consciousness, then in the future too I shall be devoured by consciousness in the very same way that I am now being devoured by present consciousness.’ Having reflected thus, he becomes indifferent towards past consciousness, he does not seek delight in future consciousness, and he is practising for revulsion towards present consciousness, for its fading away and cessation.

“What do you think, bhikkhus, is form permanent or impermanent?

... Is feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness permanent or impermanent?” - “Impermanent, venerable sir.” - “Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?” - “Suffering, venerable sir.” - “Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self?’” - “No, venerable sir.”

“Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of form whatsoever ... Any kind of feeling whatsoever ... Any kind of perception whatsoever ... Any kind of volitional formations whatsoever ... Any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all consciousness should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

“This is called, bhikkhus, a noble disciple who dismantles and does not build up; who abandons and does not cling; who scatters and does not amass; who extinguishes and does not kindle.

“And what is it that he dismantles and does not build up? He dismantles form and does not build it up. He dismantles feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness and does not build it up.

“And what is it that he abandons and does not cling to? He abandons form and does not cling to it. He abandons feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness and does not cling to it.

“And what is it that he scatters and does not amass? He scatters form and does not amass it. He scatters feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness and does not amass it.

“And what is it that he extinguishes and does not kindle? He extinguishes form and does not kindle it. He extinguishes feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness and does not kindle it.

“Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion towards form, revulsion towards feeling, revulsion towards perception, revulsion towards volitional formations, revulsion towards consciousness. Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated.

When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It’s liberated.’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.’

“This is called, bhikkhus, a noble disciple who neither builds up nor dismantles, but who abides having dismantled; who neither abandons nor clings, but who abides having abandoned; who neither scatters nor amasses, but who abides having scattered; who neither extinguishes nor kindles, but who abides having extinguished.

“And what is it, bhikkhus, that he neither builds up nor dismantles, but abides having dismantled? He neither builds up nor dismantles form, but abides having dismantled it. He neither builds up nor dismantles feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, but abides having dismantled it.

“And what is it that he neither abandons nor clings to, but abides having abandoned? He neither abandons nor clings to form, but abides having abandoned it. He neither abandons nor clings to feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, but abides having abandoned it.

“And what is it that he neither scatters nor amasses, but abides having scattered? He neither scatters nor amasses form, but abides having scattered it. He neither scatters nor amasses feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, but abides having scattered it.

“And what is it that he neither extinguishes nor kindles, but abides having extinguished? He neither extinguishes nor kindles form, but abides having extinguished it. He neither extinguishes nor kindles feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, but abides having extinguished it.

“When, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu is thus liberated in mind, the devas together with Indra, Brahmā, and Pajāpati pay homage to him from afar:

“Homage to you, O thoroughbred man!
Homage to you, O highest among men!
We ourselves do not directly know
Dependent upon what you meditate.”

1. Nakulapitā

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling among the Bhaggas at Suṃsumāragira in the Bhesakaḷā Grove, the Deer Park. Then the householder Nakulapitā approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, sat down to one side, and said to him:

“I am old, venerable sir, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, come to the last stage, afflicted in body, often ill. I rarely get to see the Blessed One and the bhikkhus worthy of esteem. Let the Blessed One exhort me, venerable sir, let him instruct me, since that would lead to my welfare and happiness for a long time.”

“So it is, householder, so it is! This body of yours is afflicted, weighed down, encumbered. If anyone carrying around this body were to claim to be healthy even for a moment, what is that due to other than foolishness? Therefore, householder, you should train yourself thus: ‘Even though I am afflicted in body, my mind will be unafflicted.’ Thus should you train yourself.”

Then the householder Nakulapitā, having delighted and rejoiced in the Blessed One’s statement, rose from his seat and, having paid homage to the Blessed One, keeping him on his right, he approached the Venerable Sāriputta.

Having paid homage to the Venerable Sāriputta, he sat down to one side, and the Venerable Sāriputta then said to him:

“Householder, your faculties are serene, your facial complexion is pure and bright. Did you get to hear a Dhamma talk today in the presence of the Blessed One?”

“Why not, venerable sir? Just now I was anointed by the Blessed One with the ambrosia of a Dhamma talk.”

“With what kind of ambrosia of a Dhamma talk did the Blessed One anoint you, householder?”

“Here, venerable sir, I approached the Blessed One....
(The householder Nakulapitā repeats his entire conversation with the Buddha.)

“It was with the ambrosia of such a Dhamma talk, venerable sir, that the Blessed One anointed me.”

“Didn’t it occur to you, householder, to question the Blessed One further as to how one is afflicted in body and afflicted in mind, and how

one is afflicted in body but not afflicted in mind?”

“We would come from far away, venerable sir, to learn the meaning of this statement from the Venerable Sāriputta. It would be good indeed if the Venerable Sāriputta would clear up the meaning of this statement.”

“Then listen and attend closely, householder, I will speak.”

“Yes, venerable sir,” the householder Nakulapitā replied. The Venerable Sāriputta said this:

“How, householder, is one afflicted in body and afflicted in mind? Here, householder, the uninstructed worldling, who is not a seer of the noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, who is not a seer of superior persons and is unskilled and undisciplined in their Dhamma, regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. He lives obsessed by the notions: ‘I am form, form is mine.’ As he lives obsessed by these notions, that form of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of form, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.

“He regards feeling as self, or self as possessing feeling, or feeling as in self, or self as in feeling. He lives obsessed by the notions: ‘I am feeling, feeling is mine.’ As he lives obsessed by these notions, that feeling of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of feeling, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.

“He regards perception as self, or self as possessing perception, or perception as in self, or self as in perception. He lives obsessed by the notions: ‘I am perception, perception is mine.’ As he lives obsessed by these notions, that perception of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of perception, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain,

displeasure, and despair.

“He regards volitional formations as self, or self as possessing volitional formations, or volitional formations as in self, or self as in volitional formations. He lives obsessed by the notions: ‘I am volitional formations, volitional formations are mine.’ As he lives obsessed by these notions, those volitional formations of his change and alter. With the change and alteration of volitional formations, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.

“He regards consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. He lives obsessed by the notions: ‘I am consciousness, consciousness is mine.’ As he lives obsessed by these notions, that consciousness of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of consciousness, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.

“It is in such a way, householder, that one is afflicted in body and afflicted in mind.

“And how, householder, is one afflicted in body but not afflicted in mind?

Here, householder, the instructed noble disciple, who is a seer of the noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, who is a seer of superior persons and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, does not regard form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form. He does not live obsessed by the notions: ‘I am form, form is mine.’ As he lives unobsessed by these notions, that form of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of form, there do not arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.

“He does not regard feeling as self, or self as possessing feeling, or feeling as in self, or self as in feeling. He does not live obsessed by the notions: ‘I am feeling, feeling is mine.’ As he lives unobsessed by these notions, that feeling of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of feeling, there do not arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.

“He does not regard perception as self, or self as possessing perception, or perception as in self, or self as in perception. He does not live obsessed by the notions: ‘I am perception, perception is mine.’ As he lives unobsessed by these notions, that perception of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of perception, there do not arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.

“He does not regard volitional formations as self, or self as possessing volitional formations, or volitional formations as in self, or self as in volitional formations. He does not live obsessed by the notions: ‘I am volitional formations, volitional formations are mine.’ As he lives unobsessed by these notions, those volitional formations of his change and alter. With the change and alteration of volitional formations, there do not arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.

“He does not regard consciousness as self, or self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness. He does not live obsessed by the notions: ‘I am consciousness, consciousness is mine.’

As he lives unobsessed by these notions, that consciousness of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of consciousness, there do not arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. “It is in such a way, householder, that one is afflicted in body but not afflicted in mind.”

This is what the Venerable Sāriputta said. Elated, the householder Nakulapitā delighted in the Venerable Sāriputta's statement.