

Self, Suffering, Clinging, and the Five Aggregates

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Here's the summary: Self and suffering are synonymous and caused by clinging (aka craving) to the five aggregates.

You're in good company (mine!) if you feel that the terms in the title progress from the familiar to totally obscure. Of all the head-scratching words in the canon, the use of the word aggregate has been one of the most perplexing to me. And though I have finally come to understand what is being talked about when it's used, the choice of the word aggregate has been of no use in that regard: I substitute terms like 'constructs,' or 'elements of reality.'

The good news is that the concepts involved offer profound insight into the nature of our day to day reality, who we are— in the ordinary sense— and the relationship between self, suffering, its causes, and its cessation.

It wasn't until I read the remarkable Culavedalla sutta (MN 44) that I understood the phrase "aggregates affected by clinging." In it, the nun Dhammadina¹ answers questions from her former husband, Visakha." Dhammadina is (and possesses and speaks with all the wisdom and insight of) a fully enlightened being (*arahant*.) In the rest of this article, I'm offering commentary on the sutta.

It begins with Visakha, himself a *non-returner*², asking four questions: What is identity, what is the origin of identity, what is the cessation of identity, and what is the path leading to the cessation of identity? Note that if, in considering these questions, you substitute 'suffering' for 'identity,' you get the Four Noble Truths. This is not just word juggling; in the sutta, Dhammadina makes it clear that our sense of self, our identity³, is synonymous with our suffering; as the Thai forest teacher, Ajahn Jumnien, is fond of saying with a big grin: "No self, no problem!"

By investigating suffering through the lens of this assertion— the synonymy of suffering and self — this sutta helps us see deeply into the nature of both suffering and identity. Visakha's first question in the sutta gets right to the point: "What is identity?" Dhammadina answers with wonderful precision that

"These five aggregates affected by clinging are called identity by the Blessed One⁴: the material form aggregate affected by clinging, the feeling aggregate affected by clinging, the perception aggregate affected by clinging, the mental formation aggregate affected by clinging, and the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging."⁵

This careful phrasing reveals that the aggregates alone are not identity: identity only arises when an aggregate is *affected by clinging*. This is a supremely crucial point. The aggregates themselves are not a problem. Only when they are affected by clinging does the self arise. Note that the five aggregates are sufficient, when affected by clinging to generate our entire sense of self, whatever that is.

This begs the question (neither asked by Visakha or answered by Dhammadina!) “What are the five aggregates in the absence of clinging?” Clearly, in the absence of clinging, there is no self to be found, but the five aggregates still exist. (1) There is still material form— we still have bodies of flesh and bone. (2) We still have feelings; in this context, we are talking about the three *feeling tones* (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.) The feeling tones arise when we first become aware of something, and color our reactions. (3) We still perceive things, and (4) create mental formations about them. (5) We still have consciousness or awareness. But, in the absence of clinging, these exist without self, without suffering.

In the short— and equally wonderful— Bahiya sutta⁶, a seeker named Bahiya of the Bark-cloth approaches the Buddha during his daily alms⁷ round and asks to be taught the Dharma. The Buddha declines twice, presumably because he wanted to pay attention to interactions with the locals— not to mention eating— but Bahiya persists. The Buddha relents and says:

"Then, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bahiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress."

As the story goes, upon hearing these words, “the mind of Bahiya was immediately released from the effluents [negative factors] through lack of clinging.” The sutta is famous not only because this is the shortest enlightenment on record, but also because of the phrasing “in reference to the seen, only the seen”, etc. The seen, the heard, and the cognized are aggregates; thus these phrases answer clearly the question of what the aggregates are in the absence of clinging.

It is this distinction that Dhammadina speaks to in answering Visakha's second question: "What is the origin of identity?" Her answer is again carefully crafted and profound. "It is craving⁸ which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by desire and lust... that is, craving for being and craving for non-being. This is what the Blessed One calls the origin of identity."

The 'renewal of being' is referring to the cycle of rebirth. The cycle of *samsara*⁹ is the cycle of rebirth is the cycle of dependent origination¹⁰, and all of them are fueled by craving.

In the phrase "...is accompanied by... lust" note that lust is an amplified form of desire, and in the way these words are used to characterize clinging, they are best understood as desire and lust for things to be different than they are in the moment. In other words, craving is an intense "gotta have it" desire:

- That makes us pull something towards us, or push it away
- For something we don't have or to *not* have something we do have
- To be something we're not, or to *not* be something we are!

This is the way to understand "craving for being and craving for non-being." The point is that either the push or the pull results in 'selfing' and therefore suffering.

Next, Visakha asks "What is the cessation of identity?" In her answer, Dhammadina makes it clear that when all forms of craving cease, so does suffering. In other words, release from suffering is the moment when the push and pull for things to be different than they are ceases.

Finally, he asks "What is the way to the cessation of identity?" Surprise, surprise, Dhammadina answer is The Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This answer is another way of pointing out the synonymy of self and suffering.

The next section of the sutta discusses "identity view" which, in terms of the first step of the Noble Eightfold Path, is wrong view. Visakha asks "How does identity view come to be." He wants to know how a view of the world that includes a sense of self arises. Dhammadina's answer describes those who in addition to having no regard for the Path:

- regard any or all of the aggregates as possessing self,
- or regard self as possessing any or all of the aggregates,
- or regard any or all of the aggregates as being in self,
- or regard self being in any or all of the aggregates.

With this answer, Dhammadina guides us closer to the origins of suffering, pointing out the specifics of the ways in which we associate self with the aggregates.

Now after all this, I'm ready to venture a discussion about the word 'aggregate.' Think geology; think concrete aggregate. Think about something composed out of smaller elements held together in a binding medium. When the smaller elements are put together— aggregated— in one way, they create material form. Aggregated in another way, they create feelings; in another, perceptions, and similarly for mental formations and consciousness.

Would you like a simple summary? Think again of Ajahn Jumnien's deep laughing "No self; no problem!"

¹ Dhammadina attained enlightenment soon after her ordination as a nun. The Buddha declared her to be foremost of all nuns in expounding the Dhamma.

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_enlightenment#Non-returner .

³ I'm using self and identity interchangeably.

⁴ Throughout the suttas, the Buddha is often referred to as "the Blessed One."

⁵ Translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

⁶ Ud 1.10, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.1.10.than.html>

⁷ The alms round is the only meal of the day for a monk.

⁸ Craving and clinging are interchangeable.

⁹ Samsara is illusion.

¹⁰ Craving is the driving force in the theory of dependent origination, which deconstructs the mechanisms by which craving leads to rebirth of the self.