

Pascal Auclair

*Moving Beyond the Mirage: Practicing with Buddhism's Five Aggregates*

Week One: "What are the Five Aggregates?"

December 4, 2017



Hi, my name is Pascal Auclair. I've been practicing in the insight and the Theravada tradition for more than 20 years now. I've been trained by Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, and I teach in Canada, in Montreal, and all over North America and Europe.

I'm happy to be spending the month with you exploring one very central teaching of the Buddha, the five aggregates. Personally, it's been extremely helpful in my practice [for] the development of wisdom and compassion and joy. What we'll do over this month is, every week we'll focus on one of these aggregates—maybe one or two. At the end of the month, we'll have explored all of them. They might become a frame of reference for you in your meditation practice.

So, why the five aggregates? What's that about? It's actually a way to deconstruct reality as it's happening. Why would [we] do that? In order to question and explore this thing that I call "I," "moi," "me." That is, from the Buddhist perspective, maybe at the center of my difficulties, our difficulties, our stress and confusion, our fear and sense of isolation, [our] sense that "I" am isolated from the rest, and [our question], "What will happen to 'I'?" We're going to try to question that. Is it true? Is there an essential "I" and an essential "me" at the center of this? The five aggregates are a really good way to deconstruct reality into these five aspects.

We could have decided to deconstruct reality into two of its aspects, say, the physical realm and the inner life. But the Buddha suggested this division in five because of the particular way that we cling to these aspects of our lives.

Maybe I should name them. The first [aggregate] is form, or everything that is of the physical realm. The second is the aggregate of feeling tone. It's this particular experience of pleasure or displeasure or neutrality that comes with any experience. Mm, that tastes good. Oh, that's a horrible thought. It's the pleasure or displeasure that comes with experience.

The way that I think of [each aggregate] is as a river of experience, as if there are five rivers flowing which make what I call "me." Aggregates—*khandhas* and *skandhas* are the terms in Pali

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and Sanskrit—seem to mean lumps, groups of things, or bundles. I like the river because it points to their changing nature.

The third [aggregate] would be perceptions. For example, as you're listening now to this talk it's not just sound. That would be the first [aggregate]. It's not just that it's pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. That would be the second aggregate. It's also that it makes sense. The words are not just sound. They actually make sense. What you're seeing is not just color and form; it's organized. That's the river of perception. The Buddha used the image of a mirage to talk about this.

The fourth aggregate is mental formation. The thoughts we have, the emotions we feel in relation to the world, the ideas that cross our mind, the intentions we have. That's a whole chapter. We're going to see this later in a few weeks.

The fifth aggregate is the aggregate of consciousness. It's what reveals reality. As you're listening to this for example, you're impacted. Sounds are revealed; senses are revealed. The revealing aspect is the consciousness.

These five aspects of our experience are always happening at the same time. "Co-arising" is the way it's presented.

Today we're going to look a little bit closer at the form aggregate. The Buddha compared this aspect of our experience, form, the physicality of the body if you want to think of it like this, to foam. I think that's extremely insightful because we might have an idea of the body as something solid. [We might think,] "It's my body, it's been my body, it has permanence, it's solid." But it seems like with this image of foam there's an invitation to actually check the direct experience as it's happening live, in real time.

As I'm sitting here, beyond my idea about my body, the images I have, the concepts I have, what is the actual experience? Wow, it's an experience of tingling. It's an experience of pressure, like a flow of pressure on the bum. It's an experience of in-breath, out-breath. It's actually extremely dynamic.

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If I quiet my mind a little bit—this is what we call mediation, quieting the mind a bit and paying attention—suddenly I dive under the ideas of body and actually encounter the experience of body. And what is that? It's a series of physical impressions. Sensory awareness reveals tingling, heat, and maybe patches of cold. If I were to stand up, which I won't do, suddenly it would be a whole different experience of verticality. The legs would suddenly be under. Another experience. The Buddha wanted us to deconstruct the fixed ideas of "I'm the body," and "it's mine," and "I'm in it," and "what's going to happen to it?" [as well as] fear of death. You will think, "wow look at that," because what you're going to see is something that is constantly in transformation, constantly arising as heat and passing and becoming harder and suddenly light, et cetera.

We're invited to become aware of this and release a little bit of the identification, maybe the appropriation. It's almost as if we had colonized the body and took it to be the mind, when we might find as we pay attention that it's actually very, very natural. It belongs to nature. Can you actually own tingling? This is of the public domain. It's not so much yours. It might be in the heat or the breath, but is it really yours? In this teaching we say that if we believe that we own something it's going to be stressful because we're going to fear losing it. Or if we don't like something it's going to define us, and we don't want to be defined by that. We want to question this.

I'm giving you a few [pieces of] information here, but [it might be helpful to reflect on] this. Is this body really mine? Where is the body of my youth, of 10 years ago, let's say? Was that really mine? If it was, it would still be there. But now there's *this* [body]. So we can reflect on it. Not information, not reflection but mediation is a third level of depth of understanding. It's a direct experience of the body.

I'll give you a little example of something I [misunderstood]. I thought when I was younger that I *was* youth. I would not have said that in a conversation, but that's how it appeared. That's how it felt. I'm youth; I'm health. Then one day I was at the doctor and the doctor said, "Actually, health is gone. There's no more health. The system is in big turmoil. There's a life threatening disease in there." Suddenly there was a shock for me, like a loss of identity. I'm health and you're telling me

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I'm not healthy? What's happening? It took me some time to understand that health was not me or mine. The physical experience of health was not actually me or mine. It was there but it was conditional. The conditions were such that there was health and suddenly it was not there. I had to do the grieving process to actually let go of the idea that it was mine and it should remain mine and [to understand that] on a deeper level health actually is not me. It's not mine. It's there, and it's worth taking care of and being very careful with, but we can't own this. We can't appropriate something that belongs to nature.

In meditation as the mind quiets down and we pay attention we'll notice that what we call a hand is actually just a field of what? Heat or cold or tingling or even space. Can that really be owned? This is a deep question. We don't answer it with words so much but we're invited to answer it with listening. With attention. Of course that will require a mind that is really gathered, not scattered, that really pays attention, that is really curious and stays attentive. We can do the exploration of form with the senses. Right now I am hearing the leaves in the tree with the wind. Am I hearing or is hearing happening by itself? Wow.

The Buddha really questioned everything about reality, and we're invited to do the same. There's something I like that we find in the sutta where the Buddha says something like, "Wise beings. Wise beings one day recognize the earth element." The earth element here would be the hardness I feel on the sofa. [The Buddha continued,] "Wise beings, they recognize earth as earth and they stop there. Unwise beings, untrained beings, they do the same. They recognize earth as earth but they go a step further, which creates a problem for them. They recognize earth as earth, but they also add this little thing: mine, me." In this practice, by paying attention, we might discover that this whole experience of body actually belongs to nature—ache and lightness and roughness and smoothness. What makes my experience of the body is absolutely natural, belongs to earth, was made by nature, belongs to nature, and will be taken back. It was nature all the way.

That's the first aggregate. Next week we'll explore the other aggregates. Have a good week of research.