

Pascal Auclair

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

Week Four: "The Fourth and Fifth Aggregates: Mental Formation and Consciousness"

December 25, 2017



Hi. This is Pascal Auclair. We're in our fourth week of our investigation into the five aggregates. This week we have two aggregates to visit. The two aggregates are mental formation and consciousness.

Mental formation, what is that? Let me review a little bit. The first aggregate is form, physicality, materiality. The Buddha said it's what is affected by cold and warmth and mosquitoes and snakes. It's the most tangible sense of the five senses. It's a river that is flowing through our experience. There's always this sound being heard. These doors, these five senses, are open. There's tingling. There's tension. There's color, light, vibration going on. As we're talking now, it's going on. That's the first aggregate.

The second aggregate is the aggregate of feeling tone. In the middle of the sounds and emotions of our lives, there's always displeasure in confusion, [pleasure] in clarity, and joy in pleasurable tastes and sounds. We can focus on [this aggregate] for a few days or a month in our practice. We can say, "Let me focus on the aggregate of feeling tone, of pleasure, displeasure, neutrality, the second one."

The third [aggregate] is the aggregate of perception, of the world making sense. Recognition. Cognition. As feeling tone is the way we're impacted by stimulus, perception is based on objects. It's [the recognition of] what [the object] is. [For example,] this is blue, this is red, this is sunset, this is sunrise, this is my friend, this is cold. [This aggregate] recognizes what [an object] is. It doesn't just feel it; it puts it in the world and makes sense of it.

There's a fourth aggregate flowing in our experience. That fourth aggregate, mental information, is the way we respond to what's happening, to stimulus and phenomena. What is it made of? This aggregate takes a lot of things into consideration. There's a lot in that chapter, we could say. There are the emotions. Something happens and I feel strongly about it, I want more of it, or I feel discouraged [by it]. These are the ways I respond or react. Emotions are part of these thoughts. That's very common. That's how [human beings] function. They have a little hint of reality. They hear a sound and they're like, "Oh, garbage truck." They perceive things and then they start thinking, *I didn't take the garbage out*. Or they'll see something [and say,] "Oh, this is

Pascal Auclair

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

Week Four: "The Fourth and Fifth Aggregates: Mental Formation and Consciousness"

December 25, 2017



so beautiful. A sunset. I need to move around here. I love the sunset here. I want to live here. I don't want to holiday to it." There's the way we engage with reality. This is the fourth aggregate and it's worth really noticing, there's so much in there.

It includes also our intentions—for example, our intentions to understand, to hear. There's something active in [us] that is like, "Let me tune in." This [happens] when we engage with the material, [instead of] just hearing sounds. There's some feeling like, "I want to know more about this."

An image the Buddha used that was very, very powerful for me, maybe for you too, is the image of the banana tree trunk. Why? Because he said, "Imagine you're looking for hardwood and you're going in the forest with your ax and you find this huge banana tree, and you cut the tree down. But, there's no hardwood in there. There's nothing solid at the center of the banana tree. It's more like an herb. But it does produce huge, beautiful green leaves, and it produces fruits and flowers that are magnificent and gorgeous. But at its core, there is nothing. Once it bears its fruits it falls down on the ground, empty, composted." [This bears a] resemblance to your thought processes, the stories you tell.

Let me give you an example about *moi*, sitting in meditation. I'm sitting there with the breath and with the body expanding, contracting of the belly, and suddenly I start to think, *Oh my god. I forgot to call Nico. I need to call Nico right after the meditation. I'll call Nico.* There's kind of a "banana production," you could say, there. My mind goes into a state, *Oh my god, oh my god*, and then five minutes later my mind will have hooked onto something else or have entirely abandoned this thought and will just rest in silence.

The same thing goes, I think, for you, at least some of the time during the day. You'll suddenly [think], *What if this happened?* You create a scenario out of [something] not working out because of this and that, and you feel it. The thought is stirring and three-dimensional; your heart is beating and you're sweating. You have all these images and you have to do something about it. This is what the Buddha compared to the banana tree trunk. He said it feels like it's substantial, but it's actually unsubstantial. There's nothing at the core, and later it'll be gone, maybe 30

Pascal Auclair

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

Week Four: "The Fourth and Fifth Aggregates: Mental Formation and Consciousness"

December 25, 2017



seconds later or maybe five minutes later or maybe next year. I used to think about this and that, and I was worried about it, and it never happened. It was a creation of the mind.

There are a lot of activities of the mind, such as thoughts and emotions, that seem to have seriousness to them, stickiness to them, to be heavy even, and if we pay attention we might notice that the thoughts are actually ephemeral. The image used by the Buddha is the banana tree trunk—nothing at the core. It seems like a big production but it falls on the ground and it's gone.

It's worth taking a look at this when we enter that realm of paying attention to our emotions. We'll discover that when we're untrained, unwise maybe, we are identified with our emotion. There is impatience. I'm impatient and I'm totally hooked, or entranced by it, or in fear, or in fantasy, or desiring something, and it's true and I really need it. [I have] put a lot of substance into it. But if I look at it with the meditative mind, I'll notice the production of the mind aspect of it, that it's a generation of mind. It's like a big show, imagery, fountains, heart beating, et cetera. Maybe if I stay long enough I'll notice the ephemeral nature of it, the fall of it, and suddenly a big story that I was telling about myself, or my past, or my future is suddenly gone. It's just this here.

It's extremely liberating to notice the ephemeral, existential, maybe even light aspect of our emotions, even those that look troubling. Of course, it needs a mind that can stay around, is not fooled, doesn't depart from the task, but rather stays and sees arising and passing nature [of the emotions]. In all these aggregates, the Buddha seems to notice the rise and fall of pleasure, the rise and fall of displeasure, the rise and fall of a sensation, the rise and disappearing nature of perception or of want. Sometimes we feel like we have to find ease, we have to gratify every desire, we [think,] *I have something I need now to feel this or that*, but if we stay around long enough maybe the thing will pass. It's very, very empowering, very liberating to see the passing nature of these aggregates.

Then there's a fifth aggregate, as if [four] were not enough. The fifth aggregate is consciousness. Consciousness is what reveals the other aggregates. How can I feel a sensation? In a sensation there is the tingling of the hardness, but there's another aspect. It's the knowing. Something

Pascal Auclair

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

Week Four: "The Fourth and Fifth Aggregates: Mental Formation and Consciousness"

December 25, 2017



reveals it. There's a function of mind called consciousness, and its function is to reveal a thought so it's known. Often this is what we call "I." I'm the observer. I'm the one feeling this sensation. I'm the one aware of the thought. The Buddha questioned that. He actually used the image of the magic trick to talk about consciousness. I think it's such a skillful image, and it seems like it's suggesting that the consciousness, this experience of hearing, created the trick of "I." I am hearing. I am thinking. I am the emotion, or I am feeling the emotion, or observing the emotion. The Buddha said, "Look at this more closely. You might see that it's actually, like the rest of the aggregates, part of nature. That it happens, you can say, almost spontaneously."

For example, I ring the bell here. The teaching says the knowing of the bell arises with the bell and dies with the bell. See if it's true for you. Can you hear the bell now? No, that's consciousness. Consciousness of the sound of the bell depends on the bell. It will rise with the bell and disappear with the bell. Consciousness of the sound of the bell cannot rise before or after the bell. It co-arises. [Your] consciousness now may be of your toes, just aroused when I suggested it. Suddenly toes were known. There's the coldness in the toes, or the warmth, or whatever is there, the touch. This is flickering. It just appeared when it was named, so the consciousness of the toes arose with the sensation and vanishes with it. All these moments [when we are] consciousness of a thought, consciousness of discomfort, consciousness of time, all these little moments, so close to each other and so quick, create a magic trick of cohesion that we perceive as "I." It's me.

In this work of the five aggregates we're really trying to see if that "I" thing, "I, my, I'm in it, it's inside of me," is true. There was consciousness earlier today of you getting out of bed. In that moment you were alive, knowing the experience of the body coming out of bed. Where is that? Where has that gone? It died. It died with standing up. The moment where you were brushing your teeth was an ephemeral moment. It arose, was known in the time of brushing the teeth, and now is inaccessible. It's inexistent.

Life, while it's there, is so *existent*. When I'm impatient it's so *palpable*. And when it's not there anymore, it's so *not there*. But when it is there, it's so there, so existent, and the work of the five

Pascal Auclair

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

Week Four: "The Fourth and Fifth Aggregates: Mental Formation and Consciousness"

December 25, 2017



aggregates helps reveal the flickering, unstable, changing, ephemeral, impertinent nature of experiences. Such a strange life we live. Where is the rest of your life? [Where is] the past? Not there. It's gone. It's vanished. Here is now, and now, but also it vanishes all the time.

Again, we're invited to [gather] information about this like we've done in the last few weeks through these talks, but we're also invited to reflect on this. What is the meaning of the concept of "I" that I created? "I was there; I'll be there." Is that really true in experience? Think about this a bit, but not too much, because as Ajhan Chah, the dear teacher of this lineage, said, "If you think about this too much, it will crack your brain."

There's another way to apprehend this: meditation. What is meditation? It's non-conceptual. We're not thinking, we're actually paying attention. It's a high-quality listening and feeling, so things can reveal their true nature. What is their true nature? They're ephemeral, and they're not exactly mine. I can't say that these are mine. By releasing a little bit of the appropriation, I can actually be responsible for what's happening. I'm not fused with it. I'm not fused with the past or my images of the future. I know they're arising phenomena that will also disappear, so I can maybe find some peace in space.

Five aggregates. It's a few years of investigation and research, as I understand it, to actually be able to define the aggregates [in real time], to be able to make that division of reality as we're living, and then to notice the ephemerality of sensation, pleasure, displeasure, as well as how things appear. [We think,] *I want that! I want that! I'm gonna say that!* [We can be aware of] all these movements of the mind, how they're fluctuating, and our consciousness of them. Where is the last conscious moment? Gone. In this way it seems like we can actually release a little bit of our fear of death, because we might recognize that there's something natural happening. It all belongs to nature, so we cannot appropriate so much, cannot colonize nature so much. Let it be what it is.

Thank you so much for tuning in, for paying attention, for considering all this crazy stuff. I wish you a good life. Maybe we'll meet one day. Ciao.