

The Five Aggregates (Skandas)

The Centered Path, Part 9 of the Buddhist Basics (Ref:

Thus I have heard...

An aggregate is a combination of elements that are together. The aggregates that make up trail mix, there are nuts, berries, chocolate etc, each are separate but make up the whole of 'trail-mix'.

The five items that combine to make us who we are. None of these are unchangeable and therefore not the unchanging self or 'Atman'. In the Anattalakkhana Sutta it explains the non-self of the aggregates. For now we need to understand the basics of human being-ness.

This explains the ever changing attributes of a person, the combination of phenomena that make us believe we are separate from what 'is'. This is a simple on the outside but really complex concept in Buddhism. It is difficult to keep it in perspective as we are often not only the object but the perceiver, this forces us to bring our minds outside our own experience and see it as an artist sees a subject or as a scientist should look at an experiment. This is the beginning of what we know as 'I, me, mine'. They are all illusory, like watching a film. All just pieces of the whole thing, not real and in constant flux of being. When we realize this we can let go easier and understand the variations of thought, experience and existence.

Each includes all that are present, past or future, internal, external, gross or subtle, common or sublime..

Form (Rupa): Both the body (organ of sense) and sense object. For example, the eye and the object it is designed to receive information about. Light, heat, sound waves, and chemicals (smell and taste) all fit here.

Feeling (Vedana): Also called sensations: Pleasant, unpleasant, indifferent.

Perception (Samjna): Taking the feeling and giving it some more attributes, warm, soft, hard, etc. This is a preliminary part of the nervous systems actions; 'there is something' (Outside of 'me' or in 'me')

Mental Formations (Samskara): also called Volition: A conditioned response to a stimulus, a conscious decision. This also relates perceptions and feelings with the form.

Consciousness (Vijnana): Just having an eye or ear and an object of them, a sight or sound still is nothing without a consciousness to pull it all together. You may even think of this as sentience or 'being alive'. There is eye consciousness, ear consciousness etc..