

Introduction to Mindfulness Pt. 2 (15) Bundle of Cognition

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Keyword Summary

viññāṇa, *upādāna*, *saññā*, *The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, aggregates, consciousness, grasping, clinging, fuel, stopping, knowing, recognition, ants, fire wand, movie frames, flow, continuity, identity, exist, engagement, involvement, preoccupation, clearly see, arising and passing

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Hello. Welcome to the fifth and last talk on the five bundles of grasping or the five bundles of clinging.

The word for clinging in Pali is *upādāna*. It has an interesting double meaning. It means both “clinging” and “fuel,” as in the fuel that keeps a fire burning. Clinging is the very fuel for more clinging. As long as we cling, it is very hard to get the fire of clinging to stop.

We must somehow stop, sooner or later. We want to appreciate the stopping. We want to appreciate the moments, the minutes, and the hours when the heart-mind is not caught in the grip of anything and can move freely, lightly, and fluidly without stopping, getting hung up, blocked, or preoccupied with anything. It is a remarkable state of mind, of heart.

The last of the five bundles is usually translated into English as “consciousness.” The Pali word is probably more like “cognition.” One problem with translating it as “consciousness” is that English speakers have deep-seated assumptions about what consciousness is. Philosophers and psychologists have been trying for years to figure out what it is – as if it is something.

In Pali, the word *viññāṇa* is not a continuous state of awareness. Rather, it is the individual moments of cognition, of just the simplest knowing. It is simpler than recognition. The words “recognition” and “cognition” have a similar root word – cognition. The Pali word *saññā*, the third bundle, has the same root as *viññāṇa*. They both have the word “knowing” in it.

Viññāṇa is the individual moments of cognition. It is a moment of hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, or a moment of knowing a thought or an idea. Whatever it is, there is the idea that the mind is constantly taking in all this different sense data coming from within and without. The data is made up of a lot of small moments of cognition. Some of them are simultaneous. We can hear, see, and smell at the same time, but each of them is unique and discrete.

But we tend to lump it all together into a gestalt, into a whole. The analogy my teacher in Burma liked to give was that of a row of ants. From a distance, it looks like a continuous stream, a black line. When we get close, we can see all these discrete ants.

Or, if you take a fire wand into the dark and quickly swirl it in a circle, the eyes will see a continuous circle of flame that is not really there. It is a construct of the mind. It is like the old movies that were made up of individual still shots at 8 frames a second. This would be reconstructed in the mind as the continuous movement of the people in the movie. But there is actually no movement. It is all just individual still shots.

The mind has the ability to gather things together and hold them as a whole, and then miss some of the individual things. There can be a lot of attachment to the whole of cognition or the process of cognition. There is a tendency to take that whole experience of cognition to be consciousness, a *state* of being aware. It feels so real, so second nature – like of course, it is there.

But it's not there in the kind of way where you can take your hand and grab it. It is like grabbing air. We end up not holding any of it. It just all disappears when the fist closes around it. It has no weight. It has no color and no shape. We might understand it to be a gathering together of all the different ways perception works. It is a gathering into a whole that is not really continuous but looks like it is, just like the movie.

Cognition seems primary to what it means to exist. Even the moment-to-moment flow of cognition can seem so primary to what it means to be alive that this last bundle is almost the same as being attached to life itself, to existing. Here, there can be clinging or grasping to just exist.

For some of us, the idea of consciousness or simple cognition seems to be the very foundation of who we are. Nothing seems more foundational and more core to our identity – to who we are. So of course, we are going to cling to it and take it as me and mine.

For the Buddha, nothing is worth clinging to. Neither a single moment of cognition nor the whole process of cognition over time are worth clinging to. It is not worth clinging to the sense of continuity of awareness or consciousness. Nothing is worth clinging to.

But we cling to it. We cling to our ideas of what it means to be conscious. We cling to how consciousness is the core feeling of being alive and being a person. We cling to the refuge of consciousness. Some people get a very beautiful feeling of a wide, spacious consciousness. They feel an all-abiding consciousness that can feel very distinct from the vagaries and particularities of what is challenging in our lives. It seems to transcend the preoccupations of our thinking mind and our emotional heart. For them, it is a place of peace, space, and freedom.

And, in a sense it is. It is quite meaningful for people to have this wonderful sense of unpreoccupied, spacious consciousness that seems to exist independently of us. For the Buddha, that also could be an object of attachment. For the Buddha, any assumption or belief that consciousness is “who I am” is a form of clinging. Any kind of engagement or involvement with this is a kind of preoccupation, a kind of attachment. It can be very, very subtle.

In the teachings of the Buddha, everything is an occasion to let go. We also let go of consciousness. We don't let go of being aware, but we let go of any clinging to being aware. At the deepest stages of meditation, it is almost as if consciousness lets go of itself. Awareness lets go of itself. There is no one doing the letting go. It is just let go, let go, let go.

We want the letting go to be so thorough and complete that we find ourselves without any grasping of any of the bundles. We don't grasp onto appearances. We don't grasp onto pleasure and pain. We don't grasp onto our recognitions and our ideas of things, and we don't grasp onto our stories. We don't even grasp onto the very sense of cognition itself. We don't grasp that which knows all these things.

This doesn't mean that these must disappear, but they exist without grasping, and without clinging. They exist freely in an ongoing flow of knowing, seeing, hearing, tasting, and thinking. Some people would say that requires a deep sense of trust. It is the trust that we don't have to hold on, to assert, get preoccupied, or be attached. We can learn to take care of ourselves without being attached.

We can learn to get through this life successfully without clinging. This doesn't make us victims. It doesn't make us helpless. It doesn't mean that we can't plan and set things up for ourselves. It means that whatever planning, care, and preparations we do for this life, we do without clinging. We hold it lightly and freely. We hold it without assertion, and therefore without any exhaustion. We hold it without the deep weariness that comes from living a life that goes from one clinging to another, one attachment to the next.

So, these are the five bundles. In the teachings of the Buddha, they are emphasized over and over again as the primary things that we get attached to. They are the primary things we create a self out of. The Buddha's idea is, “Let go, let go, let go.” Let these things operate freely without getting caught by any of them.

One of the instructions in the Buddha's classic teachings on mindfulness – *The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, The Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness* – is to clearly see the five bundles of clinging. The way to

see them is to see them arising and passing, arising and passing. We see them as part of the ongoing flow of the river of life that we are in.

And with that, I will leave you to the river of your life. May you flow freely in that river without icing up, without grabbing onto the embankment, without drowning. May you float without any clinging whatsoever in the stream of your life.

Thank you very much for this chance to teach about the five bundles. I look forward to being back on Monday to continue with this Introduction to Mindfulness series. Thank you.