

How to see the 5 aggregates

Revised notes from **(Rādha) Satta Sutta** (S 23.2), SD 52.2e (1.2.1.3-1.2.2)

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Our desire feeds the aggregates, and they, in turn, fire us up with having more desire—we end up like a snake (the uroboros) eating its own tail. While we seem to be enjoying it, “having” something to feed on, we “are” really suffering from the resulting pain. By pain (*dukkha*) here is meant the unsatisfactoriness of the experiences and the dissatisfaction that persists in our lives.

Seeing form

Technically, **form** (*rūpa*) is the *physical* aspect of our being: we are nothing but the 4 elements (earth, water, fire and wind) all in a constant flux, just like the external elements. All (*sabba*) that we can experience and know are what our faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body present to the mind.

We can also see form through any body-based meditation, such as the breath meditation. We begin by properly examining our sitting posture, noticing the earth element in hardness, resistance, roughness and so on. We note the earth by pressing our tongue against the back of the upper teeth, and so on.

Then, we note the water element in our saliva in our mouth or sweat on our body. After a while, we go on to note the fire element in the warmth in our hands, or armpits, or seat. In due course, we note the wind element in our breath, in and out, rising and falling, as being impermanent. We can then continue with our breath meditation and attain stillness.

Seeing feeling

At any point, when we are not fully focused, we are likely to experience, **feeling** (*vedanā*) that can colour or cloud our mind. We judge it *affectively* as being pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. This value-judgement is projected by **perception** (*saññā*) which works on “recognizing” their *perceived* quality based on and biased by our memories and biases. We measure our present by past standards, and keep reliving the past by our biases.

Once we perceive or recognize an experience in this manner, we react *conatively* to desire more of what we see as pleasant, reject what we see as unpleasant, ignore what appears as neither. **Formations** (*saṅkhārā*) of karmic potential grip us tenaciously as greed, hate and delusion. Greed is reinforced every time we desire the pleasant; hate is reinforced whenever we reject the unpleasant; ignorance (the root of delusion) is reinforced whenever we ignore the impermanence of the whole process. This is how the 3 roots of unwholesome karma (*akusala, mūla*) arise.

Finally, there is the cognitive process that is like the incessant flow of electrical current that powers all that we are. It is like the ever-present stage on which the drama with the 5 aggregates as leading actors play out a magical illusion that we are caught up with. This is what really goes on in our mind, which sustains and shapes our whole life—all because we

cling to the 5 aggregates. That is why they are called **the 5 aggregates of clinging**. This clinging refers to our being “stuck” to the aggregates because of craving.

(This is only a simple suggestion to notice **consciousness**, which is the most difficult of the aggregates to “see.” But with deeper understanding of the suttas and better meditation, we will be able to clearer notice and understand the workings of our consciousness.)

The mud-house parable

The (Rādha) Satta Sutta (S 23.2) is highlighted with **the parable of the mud-house** [§§8-9], where young children play with mud-houses or, if you like, sand-castles. The parable has two parts. In the first [§8], the children enjoy or like the mud-houses they are building and playing with. In the second part [§9], they stop enjoying it and destroy the mud-houses.

The meaning of the second part of the parable is elaborated in the Sutta’s closing section [§§10-15], where the Buddha teaches that we should “destroy” the 5 aggregates [1.2.1.3] by removing the lust for any of them. This means that we should not get “stuck” (*satta*) with them, that is, seeing them as something lasting and permanent.

They are all of the nature to change; hence, to be unsatisfactory. Being impermanent and unsatisfactory, they are necessarily non-self, that is, without any abiding essence.

The Sutta closes with the Buddha declaring that “the cessation of craving is nirvana.” [§15]. The cessation of craving (*taṇha-k,khaya*) is a synecdoche (shorthand) for the destruction of the mental influxes, that is, those of sensual lust (*kāma’āsava*), of existence (*bhav’āsava*) and of ignorance (*avijjāsava*). One who has destroyed all these influxes is known as an arhat.