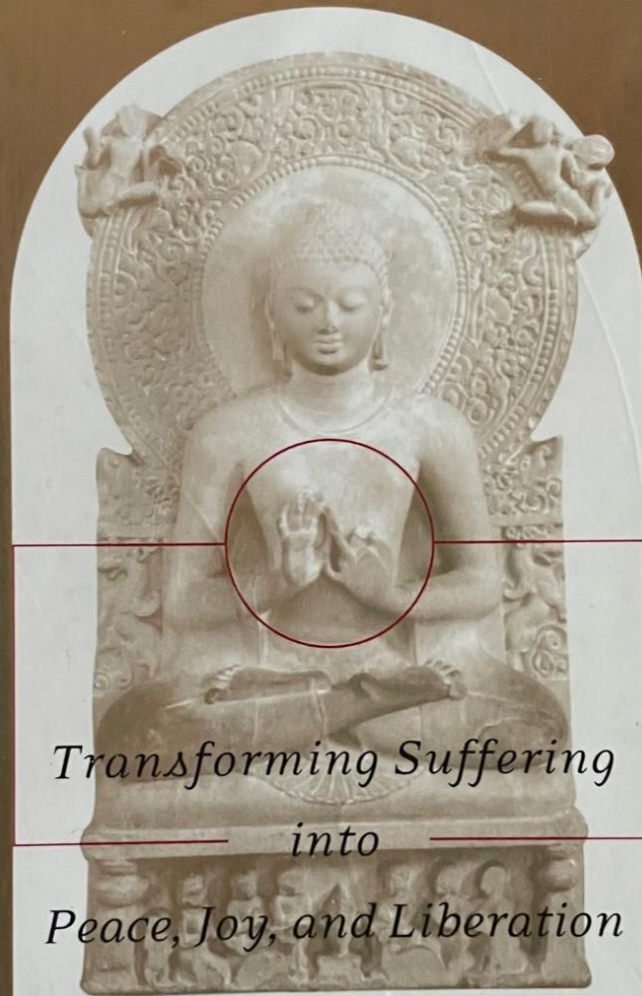


The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

"Thich Nhat
Hanh writes
with the voice
of the Buddha."
—Sogyal Rinpoche



*Transforming Suffering
into
Peace, Joy, and Liberation*

THICH
NHAT
HANH

The Five Aggregates

According to Buddhism, a human being is composed of Five Aggregates (*skandhas*): form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. The Five Aggregates contain everything — both inside us and outside of us, in nature and in society.

Form (*rupa*) means our body, including our five sense organs and our nervous system. To practice mindfulness of the body, you might like to lie down and practice total relaxation. Allow your body to rest, and then be mindful of your forehead. “Breathing in, I am aware of my forehead. Breathing out, I smile to my forehead.” Use the energy of mindfulness to embrace your forehead, your brain, your eyes, your ears, and your nose. Every time you breathe in, become aware of one part of your body, and every time you breathe out, smile to that part of your body. Use the energies of mindfulness and love to embrace each part. Embrace your heart, your lungs, and your stomach. “Breathing in, I am aware of my heart. Breathing out, I embrace my heart.” Practice scanning your body with the light of mindfulness and smiling to each part of your body with compassion and concern. When you finish scanning in this way, you will feel wonderful. It takes only half an hour, and your body will rest deeply during those thirty minutes. Please take good care of your body, allowing it to rest and embracing it with tenderness, compassion, mindfulness, and love.

Learn to look at your body as a river in which every cell is

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a drop of water. In every moment, cells are born and cells die. Birth and death support each other. To practice mindfulness of the body, follow your breathing and focus your attention on each part of the body, from the hair on your head to the soles of your feet. Breathe mindfully and embrace each part of the body with the energy of mindfulness, smiling to it with recognition and love. The Buddha said that there are thirty-two parts of the body to recognize and embrace. Identify the form elements in your body: earth, water, air, and heat. See the connection of these four elements inside and outside of your body. See the living presence of your ancestors and future generations, as well as the presence of all other beings in the animal, vegetal, and mineral realms. Become aware of the positions of your body (standing, sitting, walking, lying down) and its movements (bending, stretching, taking a shower, getting dressed, eating, working, etc.). When you master this practice, you will be able to be aware of your feelings and your perceptions as they arise, and you will be able to practice looking deeply into them.

See your body's nature of impermanence and interbeing. Observe that your body has no permanent entity, and you will no longer identify yourself solely with your body or consider it to be a "self." See the body as a formation, empty of any substance that might be called "self." See your body as an ocean filled with hidden waves and sea monsters. The ocean might be calm at times, but at other times you can be caught in a storm. Learn to calm the waves and master the monsters without allowing yourself to be carried away or caught by them. With deep looking, the body ceases to be an aggregate of grasping (*upadana skandha*), and you dwell in freedom, no longer caught by fear.



The Second Aggregate is feelings (*vedana*). There is a river of feelings within us, and every drop of water in that river is

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a feeling. To observe our feelings, we sit on the bank of the river and identify each feeling as it flows by. It may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. One feeling lasts for a while, and then another comes. Meditation is to be aware of each feeling. Recognize it, smile to it, look deeply into it, and embrace it with all our heart. If we continue to look deeply, we discover the true nature of that feeling, and we are no longer afraid, even of a painful feeling. We know we are more than our feelings, and we are able to embrace each feeling and take good care of it.

Looking deeply into each feeling, we identify its roots as being in our body, our perceptions, or our deep consciousness. Understanding a feeling is the beginning of its transformation. We learn to embrace even our strong emotions with the energy of mindfulness until they are calmed down. We practice mindful breathing, focusing our attention on the rise and fall of our abdomen and take good care of our emotions just as we would take good care of our baby brother or sister. We practice looking deeply into our feelings and emotions and identify the nutriments that have brought them into being.¹ We know that if we are able to offer ourselves nutriments that are more wholesome, we can transform our feelings and emotions. Our feelings are formations, impermanent and without substance. We learn not to identify ourselves with our feelings, not to consider them as a self, not to seek refuge in them, not to die because of them. This practice helps us cultivate non-fear, and it frees us from the habit of clinging, even clinging to suffering.



The Third Aggregate is perceptions (*samjñā*). In us there is a river of perceptions. Perceptions arise, stay for a period of

¹ See chap. 7, pp. 31-39.

time, and cease to be. The aggregate of perception includes noticing, naming, and conceptualizing, as well as the perceiver and the perceived. When we perceive, we often distort, which brings about many painful feelings. Our perceptions are often erroneous, and we suffer. It is very helpful to look deeply into the nature of our perceptions, without being too sure of anything. When we are too sure, we suffer. "Am I sure?" is a very good question. If we ask this, we'll have a good chance to look again and see if our perception is incorrect. The perceiver and the perceived are inseparable. When the perceiver perceives wrongly, the things perceived are also incorrect.

A man was rowing his boat upstream when, suddenly, he saw another boat coming toward him. He shouted, "Be careful! Be careful!" but the boat plowed right into him, nearly sinking his boat. The man became angry and began to shout, but when he looked closely, he saw that there was no one in the other boat. The boat had drifted downstream by itself. He laughed out loud. When our perceptions are correct, we feel better, but when our perceptions are not correct, they can cause us a lot of unpleasant feelings. We have to look deeply into things so we will not be led into suffering and difficult feelings. Perceptions are very important for our well-being.

Our perceptions are conditioned by the many afflictions that are present in us: ignorance, craving, hatred, anger, jealousy, fear, habit energies, etc. We perceive phenomena on the basis of our lack of insight into the nature of impermanence and interbeing. Practicing mindfulness, concentration, and deep looking, we can discover the errors of our perceptions and free ourselves from fear and clinging. All suffering is born from wrong perceptions. Understanding, the fruit of meditation, can dissolve our wrong perceptions and liberate us. We have to be alert always and never seek refuge in our perceptions. The *Diamond Sutra* reminds us,

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"Where there is perception, there is deception." We should be able to substitute perceptions with *prajña*, true vision, true knowledge.²



The Fourth Aggregate is mental formations (*samskara*). Anything made from another element is a "formation." A flower is a formation, because it is made from sunshine, clouds, seeds, soil, minerals, gardeners, and so on. Fear is also a formation, a mental formation. Our body is a formation, a physical formation. Feelings and perceptions are mental formations, but because they are so important, they have their own categories. According to the Vijñānavada School of the Northern Transmission, there are fifty-one categories of mental formations.

This Fourth Aggregate consists of forty-nine of these mental formations (excluding feelings and perceptions). All fifty-one mental formations are present in the depths of our store consciousness in the form of seeds (*bijas*). Every time a seed is touched, it manifests on the upper level of our consciousness (mind consciousness) as a mental formation. Our practice is to be aware of the manifestation and the presence of mental formations and to look deeply into them in order to see their true nature. Since we know that all mental formations are impermanent and without real substance, we do not identify ourselves with them or seek refuge in them. With daily practice, we are able to nourish and develop wholesome mental formations and transform unwholesome ones. Freedom, non-fear, and peace are the result of this practice.



The Fifth Aggregate is consciousness (*vijñana*). Consciousness here means store consciousness, which is at the base of

² For more on perceptions, see pp. 52-54.

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everything we are, the ground of all of our mental formations. When mental formations are not manifesting, they reside in our store consciousness in the form of seeds — seeds of joy, peace, understanding, compassion, forgetfulness, jealousy, fear, despair, and so on. Just as there are fifty-one categories of mental formations, there are fifty-one kinds of seeds buried deep in our consciousness. Every time we water one of them or allow it to be watered by someone else, that seed will manifest and become a mental formation. We have to be careful about which seeds we and others water. If we let the negative seeds in us be watered, we can be overwhelmed. The Fifth Aggregate, consciousness, contains all the other aggregates and is the basis of their existence.

Consciousness is, at the same time, both collective and individual. The collective is made of the individual, and the individual is made of the collective. Our consciousness can be transformed at its base through the practice of mindful consuming, mindfully guarding our senses, and looking deeply. The practice should aim at transforming both the individual and the collective aspects of our consciousness. It is essential to practice with a Sangha to produce such a transformation. When the afflictions within us are transformed, our consciousness becomes wisdom, shining near and far and showing the way to liberation to both individuals and the whole society.



These Five Aggregates inter-are. When you have a painful feeling, look into your body, your perceptions, your mental formations, and your consciousness to see what has brought about this feeling. If you have a headache, your painful feeling comes from the First Aggregate. Painful feelings can also come from mental formations or from perceptions. You might, for example, think someone hates you who actually loves you.

Look deeply into the five rivers of yourself and see how each river contains the other four. Look at the river of form. In the beginning you may think that form is just physical and not mental. But every cell in your body contains all aspects of yourself. It is now possible to take one cell of your body and duplicate your whole body. It is called "cloning." The one contains the all. One cell of your body contains your entire body. It also contains all of your feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, and not only yours, but also your parents' and your ancestors'. Each aggregate contains all the other aggregates. Each feeling contains all perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Looking into one feeling, you can discover everything. Look in the light of interbeing, and you will see the all in the one and the one in the all. Don't think that form exists outside of feelings or that feelings exist outside of form.

In the *Turning the Wheel Sutra*, the Buddha said, "The Five Aggregates, when grasped at, are suffering." He did not say that the Five Aggregates are, in themselves, suffering. There is a helpful image in the *Ratnakuta Sutra*. A man throws a clod of earth at a dog. The dog looks at the clod and barks at it furiously. The dog does not realize that it is the man and not the clod of earth that is responsible. The sutra goes on to say, "In the same way, an ordinary person caught in dualistic conceptions thinks that the Five Aggregates are the cause of his suffering, but in fact the root of his suffering is his lack of understanding about the impermanent, nonself, and interdependent nature of the Five Aggregates."³ It is not the Five Aggregates that make us suffer, but the way we relate to them. When we observe the impermanent, nonself, and interdependent nature of all that is, we will not feel aversion for life. In fact, this knowing will help us see the preciousness of all life.

³ *Ratnakuta Sutra*, chap. 23. *Taisho* 310.

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When we do not understand correctly, we become attached to things and get caught by them. In the *Ratnakuta Sutra*, the terms "aggregate" (skandha) and "aggregate of clinging" (upadana skandha) are used. Skandhas are the Five Aggregates that give rise to life. Upadana skandhas are the same Five Aggregates as the objects of our grasping. The root of our suffering is not the aggregates but our grasping. There are people who, because of their incorrect understanding of what the root of suffering is, instead of dealing with their attachments, fear the six sense objects and feel aversion for the Five Aggregates. A Buddha is someone who lives in peace, joy, and freedom, neither afraid of nor attached to anything.

When we breathe in and out and harmonize the Five Aggregates within us, this is true practice. But to practice is not to confine ourselves to the Five Aggregates within ourselves. We are also aware that the Five Aggregates in us have their roots in society, in nature, and in the people with whom we live. Meditate on the assembly of the Five Aggregates in yourself until you are able to see the oneness of your own self and the universe. When the Bodhisattva Avalokita looked deeply into the reality of the Five Aggregates, he saw the emptiness of self, and he was liberated from suffering. If we contemplate the Five Aggregates in a diligent way, we, too, will be liberated from suffering. If the Five Aggregates return to their sources, the self no longer exists. To see the one in the all is to break through the attachment to the false view of self, the belief in the self as an unchanging entity that can exist on its own. To break through this false view is to be liberated from every form of suffering.