

The Significance of the Five Aggregates in Understanding the Buddhist Concept of Reality

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The doctrine of five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*) should be examined comprehensively to understand its significance as follows: Consciousness (*viññāna*) arises every moment when sense organ, corresponding object, and attention (*samannāhāra*) meet together, forming a kind of stream (*viññānasota*). When consciousness arises, the five aggregates always arise together. Therefore, the “stream of consciousness” is nothing but the “stream of the five aggregates”. This “stream of the five aggregates” constitutes an individual’s “subjective experiential world” (*loka*) which is identified as “reality” in Buddhism. If ego-consciousness is involved in the arising of the five aggregates, they become the five aggregates of clinging (*pañcupādānakkhandha*) in the sense that they are constructed (or conditioned) by craving (*taṇhā*), conceit (*māna*), wrong view (*ditṭhi*). The “subjective experiential world” consisted of the five aggregates of clinging is *dukkha* for an individual who has constructed (*abhisamkharoti*) it as “I” or “mine”, due to its inherent impermanent (*anicca*) nature. The constructed “world” is *saṃkhata* in the sense that it is constructed (or conditioned) by “I-ness” ignorance and craving. And the stream of the “world” is *samsāra*. The way to end the “subjective experiential world” consisted of the five aggregates of clinging is to understand the true nature of this “world”, and not to cling to it. That is, by contemplating on the five aggregates which constitute the “world” as impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anatta*), the practitioner deconstructs (*visamkhāra*) “his world” through the process of disenchantment (*nibbidā*), dispassion (*virāga*), and liberation (*vimutti*). When a practitioner completely removes ignorance and craving toward “his world” consisted of the five aggregates of clinging, he achieves complete extinction of the defilements (*kilesa-parinibbāna*) and becomes arahant. And the arahant, at his death, achieves complete extinction of the personality-factors (*khandha-parinibbāna*) in which the conditionality of the five aggregates itself is eliminated. Thus, it can be observed that the five aggregates are not only a theoretical basis but also a practical basis to understand the Buddhist concept of reality.

Keywords: Five Aggregates, World, Dukkha, Nibbāna