

THE FIVE ILLUSIONISTS

Venerable Dhammavuddho Thero
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa

INTRODUCTION

The teachings of the Buddha centre on the Four Noble Truths, and they are: suffering (*dukkha*), its cause, its ending, and the way leading to its ending. In the First Noble Truth, the Buddha said that the five aggregates of attachment are *dukkha*.¹ This understanding helps us to reduce *dukkha* and leads us towards enlightenment. This is why the five aggregates of attachment is a very important topic which arises time and again in the *Nikāyas*.²

In fact it is so important that at every stage of the Noble Path, a Noble disciple of the Buddha is advised to thoroughly ponder on these five aggregates of attachment as it will lead one towards full liberation.³

With this in mind, what are these five aggregates of attachment? The Pali phrase for it is *pañca upādāna khandha*, consisting of three words:

¹ In the First Noble (*Ariyan*) Truth of *dukkha*, the Buddha defined *dukkha* as: being born is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, dying is *dukkha*; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are *dukkha*; association with the disliked is *dukkha*, separation from the liked is *dukkha*; not getting what one wants is *dukkha*; in brief, the five aggregates of attachment are *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is now usually translated as suffering or unsatisfactoriness.

² *Nikāyas* means the collections of Buddha's discourses. Their importance is discussed in 'Liberation: Relevance of Sutta-Vinaya' by the author.

³ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.122. This will be discussed later in this article.

- *Pañca* means five,
- *Upādāna* means attachment, and
- *Khandha* means aggregates.

Therefore, *pañca upādāna khandha* can be translated as five aggregates of attachment. The key word here is ‘attachment.’ Because of attachment to the five aggregates, suffering arises.

HOW DOES ATTACHMENT COME ABOUT?

Attachment arises because we have a perception of a ‘self,’ an ‘I’ and a ‘mine’ in the five aggregates of attachment. These five aggregates are form or body (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*sañña*), volition (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). The last four can be grouped together as mind, so these five aggregates are actually body and mind.⁴

Attachment comes about because of the perception of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ in the five aggregates. With the arising of attachment, suffering comes about.

For example, if you learn either from the newspaper or from the neighbours that somebody’s son was killed in an accident, you will not grieve because you do not consider that person to be yours or anything to do with you. But, if someone came and told you “Just now while your son was coming home from school, he was knocked down by a car and died!” What would happen? You would immediately be struck by this news. You would probably burst into tears, cry

⁴ It is not mentality-materiality (*nāma-rūpa*) that is body and mind, but the five aggregates. As we read the discourses (*Suttas*) further, we will understand that *nāma-rūpa* is slightly different. This will be discussed later in this article.

very loudly and, perhaps, grieve unbearably for a very long time.

Also in this period of economic recession, you may read or hear about people going bankrupt. It will probably not affect you very much. But, if your own business goes bankrupt, it will be a disaster to you. Some might even commit suicide.

The problem here is attachment. It comes from the perception of the 'I' and 'mine.' This 'mine' can extend to my family, my property, to those of my same race, to those of my same religion, to those of my same country. This leads to quarrels, fights, and even wars, as history has repeatedly shown.

To better understand attachment, we need to know why and how the five aggregates give rise to the perception of an 'I' and a 'mine.' The discourses of the Buddha basically help us see there is no 'I,' no 'mine' in these five aggregates. If we can see that, then we will let go of our attachment to the five aggregates.

THE FIVE AGGREGATES

The first aggregate is form/body (*rūpa*). *Rūpa* literally means picture or image because it is the object of eye-consciousness (*cakkhuvīññāna*). Common translations of *rūpa* include form and body. Every one of us has a body. If the body is short, you say, "I am short." If the body is beautiful you say, "I am beautiful." If the body is sick, you say, "I am sick." So you can see how easily we associate the body with the 'self.'

The second aggregate is feeling (*vedanā*). When happy feeling arises, you say, "I am feeling happy." When angry feeling arises, you say, "I am angry." And when sorrowful feeling arises, you say, "I suffer, I grieve." So, again we

easily associate feeling with the ‘self.’

The third aggregate is perception (*sañña*). Perception means you have a certain conception of something. In the *suttas* the Buddha mentioned that you may have the perception that this is yellow or some other colour. But somebody else may not perceive this to be yellow. He (or she) may have a different opinion from you, more so if he is colour blind. Also, if you were to wear dark glasses, you will swear this is a certain colour. It is only when you remove your dark glasses, then you realize it’s a different colour. So perceptions are not very reliable. You may perceive that a certain person is very handsome or beautiful, but somebody else may not have the same perception. Or you have the perception that somebody is a very nice person, but he will not appear nice to his enemy. These are examples of how ‘my perception’ arises.

The fourth aggregate is volition (*saṅkhāra*). Dependent on sense object and sense organ, consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. This is followed by feeling, perception, thoughts and volition. For example, you might see a beautiful girl or handsome man, and a pleasant feeling arises. This is followed by a perception that this is a very attractive person, and the thought of it gives rise to a decision/volition “I like to be his/her friend.” So volition — to do or not to do this or that — is again easily associated with the ‘self.’

The fifth aggregate is consciousness (*viññāna*). Consciousness means seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touch and thinking consciousness. When consciousness arises you say, “I see” or “I hear,” etc. — in this way, ‘I’ arises with the normal consciousness.

SUTTA REFERENCES

The Buddha said that we tend to regard the aggregates as the ‘self’ (e.g. this body is ‘myself’), or as belonging to the ‘self’ (e.g. my perception), or as being in the ‘self’ (e.g. this feeling in me), or the ‘self’ as being in the aggregates (e.g. the me in this body). In this way we associate the five aggregates with ‘I,’ ‘mine’ and ‘myself.’

Now we shall go into some of the *Suttas*⁵ as they explain more clearly the Buddha’s teaching. It is very important that we always refer to the *Suttas*, because the words of the Buddha are always better than those of anyone of us. No matter how well we try to explain the Buddha’s teaching, we can never explain as well as the Buddha. Therefore, relying on the Buddha’s words takes priority. We only try to clarify when certain points are not so clear. However, this clarification must always be consistent with or based on the *Sutta-Vinaya*⁶ which is the only authority in determining what the Buddha’s teachings are.⁷ That is why it is always best to teach from the *Suttas*.

Most of the *Suttas* on the five *khandhas* are found in the third volume of the *Sarīyutta Nikāya*. The first chapter in this volume is chapter number twenty two and it deals with the five aggregates.

⁵ *Suttas* means the Buddha’s discourses. The earliest four collections (*Nikāyas*) of the Buddha’s discourses are the *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sarīyutta Nikāya*, and *Anguttara Nikāya*. These four *Nikāyas* are consistent, and contain the flavour of liberation.

⁶ *Vinaya* means the monastic discipline.

⁷ *Anguttara Nikāya* 4.180 where the Buddha advised us to compare, without scorning or welcoming, any teachings with the *Sutta-Vinaya*. If they are not in accordance with the *Sutta-Vinaya*, we should reject them. The Buddha took a stand, and he was very firm. See also footnote 39.

FIVE AGGREGATES AND MEMORY OF PAST LIVES

At Sāvatti... the Buddha said:—

“Whatsoever recluses or Brahmins, monks, remember their diverse former lives, in so doing, all of them remember the five aggregates of attachment, or one or other of these five aggregates, thus: ‘Of such and such a body was I in time past’ says one; and so remembering, it is body, monks, that he thus remembers. ‘I felt thus and thus,’ says he; and in so remembering it is feeling that he thus remembers. ‘Thus and thus I perceived,’ says he; and in so remembering it is perception that he thus remembers. ‘Thus and thus in conditioning was I,’ says he; and in thus remembering it is the conditioners that he remembers. ‘Thus and thus conscious was I,’ says he; and in so remembering it is consciousness that he remembers.”⁸

Five aggregates and past lives. Here the Buddha is saying that whenever we refer to ourselves in our past lives, we always refer to the five aggregates. In the fourth item, it is the conditioner⁹ that we remember.

Thus and thus in conditioning was I. All things in the world depend on conditions, all things arise and pass away dependent on conditions. For example, ‘A’ might arise due to a certain ‘conditioner.’ After it has arisen it causes ‘B’ to

⁸ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.79: The Prey.

⁹ The *Pali* word is *saṅkhāra* and it can be translated as conditioner. Sometimes some people use the translation ‘conditioned things.’ However the *Pali* word ‘*saṅkhata*’ means conditioned things. ‘*Saṅkhāra*’ is that which conditions something. From the *Suttas* we see the word ‘*saṅkhāra*’ is better translated as ‘conditioner.’ Later we can see as far as the five aggregates are concerned, ‘*saṅkhāra*’ is a definite form of conditioner, and that is volition.

arise simultaneously or later. So 'A' is a 'conditioner' for 'B,' and 'B' is a 'conditioned thing.' But even though 'B' is a conditioned thing, it later conditions something else, say 'C.' So 'B' becomes a conditioner for 'C' and, later, 'C' becomes a conditioner for something else. In a way, things in the world are conditioners as well as conditioned things.

FIVE AGGREGATES DEFINED

“And why, monks, do you say body? One is affected,¹⁰ monks. That is why the word ‘body’ is used. Affected by what? Affected by touch of cold and heat, hunger and thirst; of gnats, mosquitoes, wind and sun and snakes. One is affected, monks. That is why you say ‘body.’

And why, monks, do you say ‘feeling’? One feels, monks. That is why the word ‘feeling’ is used. Feels what? Feels pleasure and pain; feels neutral feelings. One feels, monks. That is why the word ‘feeling’ is used.

And why, monks do you say ‘perception’? One perceives, monks. That is why the word ‘perception’ is used. Perceives what? Perceives blue-green, perceives yellow, or red or white. One perceives, monks. That is why ‘perception’ is used.

And why, monks, do you say ‘conditioner’ (saṅkhāra)? Because they condition the conditioned. That is why, monks, the word ‘conditioner’ is used. And what do they condition? Body as body is the conditioned that they condition. Feeling as feeling is the conditioned that they condition. Perception as perception is the conditioned that they condition. Conditioner as conditioner is the

¹⁰ The word affected or afflicted (*rūpatti*) is related to the word body (*rūpa*). So the word ‘*rūpa*’ comes from the fact that the ‘body’ is affected by conditions.

conditioned that they condition. Consciousness as consciousness is the conditioned that they condition. They condition the conditioned. That is why the word 'conditioner' is used.

And why monks do you say, 'consciousness'? One is conscious, monks. Therefore the word 'consciousness' is used. Conscious of what? Of (flavours) sour or bitter; acrid or sweet; alkaline or non-alkaline; saline or non-saline. One is conscious, monks. That is why the word consciousness is used.”¹¹

FIVE AGGREGATES... WHY BOTHER?

Once, the Venerable Sāriputta and Venerable MahāKotthita were staying at Benares, in Isipatana, in the Deer Park.

Then the Venerable MahāKotthita, rising in the evening from his solitude, came to Venerable Sāriputta... and thus addressed him:—

“Āvuso Sāriputta...”¹²

Daily life of monks. We find in the *Suttas* that the daily life of monks during the Buddha's time began with alms round in the morning to gather food. Upon returning, they ate their food either in the monastery or in the forest. Thereafter, they retired to a secluded place for the rest of the day, practising meditation. When the sun set, they would come to the most senior monk to discuss the *Dhamma*. Here, Venerable MahāKotthita came to see Venerable Sāriputta and addressed

¹¹ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.79: The Prey.

¹² *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.122: Virtue.

him, “*Āvuso*, Sāriputta.”¹³

“What are the things (*Dhamma*) that should be thoroughly pondered by a virtuous monk?”

And Venerable Sāriputta answered, “The five aggregates of attachment, friend Kotthita, are the things that should be thoroughly pondered by a virtuous monk, as being impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a dart, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as empty, as not self.

What five aggregates? The aggregates of body, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. By a virtuous monk, friend Kotthita, these five aggregates of attachment should be thoroughly pondered. Indeed friend, it is possible for a virtuous monk so thoroughly pondering these five aggregates of attachment to realize the fruits of stream-winning (*sotāpanna*).”¹⁴

Five aggregates contemplation. Here, Venerable Sāriputta is saying that if an ordinary (*puthujjana*) monk thoroughly contemplates the five aggregates of attachment, it is possible for him to attain *sotāpanna*. Venerable Sāriputta said that a monk should contemplate the five aggregates with the following characteristics which are very important: as being impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a dart, as a calamity, an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as empty, as not self.

The first characteristic is impermanence. I think you all

¹³ *Āvuso* is sometimes translated as reverend or friend, a term the monks used to address each other. However, when the Buddha was about to pass away, he instructed that senior monks may address junior monks as *āvuso* or by their name, but junior monks should address senior monks as *Bhante* (Venerable Sir).

¹⁴ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.122: Virtue.

The Five Illusionists

know the impermanent changing nature of the body, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness.

As suffering... because if you are attached to them, they give you suffering. For example, the body will grow old because of its impermanent nature. And when it grows old, you lament the fact that you are growing old. If you are attached to the body, then you will suffer when your body grows older and looks uglier. Worse still, when the body dies one day, either your own or your child's body, that will be a lot of suffering.

As a disease... because the aggregates are liable to sickness, deterioration, and cessation/death they are kind of diseased. And also if you have too much attachment, for example if you crave for sensual pleasures/feelings, then it is a kind of disease. When you try to satisfy this desire, you can go quite out of your way to satisfy this desire. Then it becomes a serious sickness or disease e.g. a rapist or paedophile.

As a tumour or a cancer... we do not need a doctor to tell us we have cancer. All of us have cancer because we can die anytime due to our limited life span. On the average we live up to seventy plus years. Since the body is going to die and we do not know when we are going to die, it is as though we have cancer.

As a dart... a dart is like an arrow that pokes you. The five aggregates poke us and make us suffer. The body gives you bodily suffering, and the mind gives you mental suffering. In 1996 when I was in Australia, I found that many Caucasians like to meditate for different reasons not related to an interest in Buddhism. At the beginning, some of them came to the monastery because they had a lot of mental suffering. They came to learn meditation to ease their mental suffering. As their meditation progressed, they developed an interest in Buddhism. Then they came to listen to the

The Five Illusionists

Dhamma. And slowly after listening to the *Dhamma*, they might profess to be Buddhists.

As a calamity... because anytime the body and mind may pass away.

As an affliction... this is like a sickness, suffering.

As alien... the word 'alien' is quite interesting. The Buddha is telling us the five aggregates, i.e. the body and mind, are alien, external to us. This you will understand as you meditate. We become calmer and calmer, more and more tranquil as we go deeper into our mind. Slowly, the body begins to fade away, and the active mind also begins to fade away from us. When the meditation progresses, the world also begins to fade away from us. As we go deeper and deeper into our mind, we will realize that this body and mind and the entire world are as though alien or external to us.

As disintegrating... as something that is breaking up. We know that our body and mind are breaking up slowly as we continue to age, until we finally die.

As empty... Why? There is no unchanging core or essence in the body and mind. Later you will find some similes that the Buddha gave on the five aggregates and you will see how apt they are.

Non-self or not-self (*anattā*)... *attā*, usually translated as self, soul or ego, means something permanent, unchanging, not subject to conditions. *Anattā* means there is nothing that is permanent, unchanging, unconditioned. This body and mind are always changing, a stream of flux. That is why there is nothing that is permanent and unchanging here.

The empty nature of body and mind. The nature of the body and mind is empty. The body is made up of cells, millions and millions of cells. These cells are continuously arising and passing away. No two moments is the body the same. It seems that according to scientists, the cells in our body are

completely changed every seven years. So this body you are carrying about with you now is completely different from the body you had seven years ago. Just imagine that! As the cells die, your body sheds them. In a way, we are like snakes. As you know, every now and again the snake will have to shed its skin. As it grows in size, it starts to shed the old skin and it grows new skin which is slightly bigger so that it can accommodate itself. In the same way, we are shedding ourselves little by little and, slowly over seven years, our whole body is completely changed. So you can see that the body is made up of cells which are arising and passing away all the time, with no unchanging core.

When you look into these cells, what do you find? In every cell, you will find atoms, perhaps a whole lot of atoms. I do not know how many atoms there are in a cell but, basically, our body is made up of billions and billions of atoms. We are told that every atom is a huge void in which particles of energy like electrons, protons, neutrons, photons, mesons, etc. are moving to and fro. Just as when you look into the sky at night, you will find that most of outer space is empty except for the stars and planets here and there. You can say that 99.9999% of outer space is empty. In the same way, every atom in the body is 99.9999% empty. In other words, our body which is made up of these atoms is no different from the air around us — basically emptiness! Now it appears that scientists are beginning to understand that this 99.9999% emptiness is not really empty. It is actually consciousness or mind.

Consciousness conjures up a magic show. So how is it that we see ourselves as human bodies? The Buddha says we have been deceived by the mind.¹⁵ Because of past intentional

¹⁵ *Majjhima Nikāya 75: Māgandiya Sutta.*

deeds (*kamma*), consciousness makes you see yourself now as a solid human being with a head, a body, two hands and two feet. If you work much evil *kamma* now, you may see yourself in the next life as an animal walking on all fours with a tail. That is why the Buddha says consciousness is like a conjuror. It conjures up a magic show, one life time after another. As we can observe, the mind is changing even faster than the body, with one thought succeeding another, moods or feelings ever changing, etc.. Thus the five aggregates are a flux of conditions, ever changing, without a core or essence.

MahāKotthita asked Venerable Sāriputta again, “Friend Sāriputta, what are the things that should be thoroughly pondered by a monk who is a stream winner (sotāpanna, the first fruition)?”

Sāriputta said, “By a monk who is a stream winner, it is these same five aggregates of attachment that should be thoroughly pondered.

Indeed, friend, it is possible for a monk who is a stream winner... by so pondering these five aggregates of attachment... to realize the fruits of once returning (sakadāgāmi, the second fruition).”

“But, friend Sāriputta, what are the things that should be thoroughly pondered by a monk who is a once-returner?”

“By one who is a once-returner, it is the same five aggregates of attachment that should be pondered thoroughly.

Indeed, it is possible, friend, for one who is once-returner by so pondering to realize the fruits of non-returning (anāgāmi, the third fruition).”

“But, friend Sāriputta, what are the things that should be thoroughly pondered by a monk who is a non-returner?”

The Five Illusionists

“By one who is a non-returner, it is the same five aggregates of attachment that should be pondered thoroughly. It is possible, friend, for a non-returner by so pondering... to realize the fruits of arahanthood (fourth fruition).”

“But, friend Sāriputta, what are the things that should be pondered thoroughly by an arahant?”

“By an arahant, friend Kothhita, these same five aggregates should be thoroughly pondered; as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a dart, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as empty, as not self.

For the arahant, friend, there is nothing further to be done, nor is there return to up-heaping of what is done. Nevertheless, these things, if practised and developed, conduce to a happy existence and to mindfulness and recollection in this present life.”¹⁶

Relevance of five aggregates. In this *sutta*, the arahant Sāriputta is saying that if an ordinary (*puthujjana*) monk thoroughly contemplates on the five aggregates of attachment, he can attain the first *Ariyan* fruition. The monk with first fruition should also thoroughly ponder on the five aggregates of attachment and, in so doing, he can attain second fruition. The second fruition monk should also thoroughly ponder on the same five aggregates of attachment, and the third fruition monk should also thoroughly ponder on the five aggregates of attachment, and so on. So you can see how important the five aggregates of attachment are. At every stage of the *Ariyan* path a person should thoroughly ponder on these five aggregates of attachment.

¹⁶ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.122: Virtue.

STABBED BY TWO KNIVES

Thus have I heard: The Exalted One was once staying among the Bhaggi, at the Crocodile-Haunt in Bhesakalā Grove in the Deer-Park. Then the householder Nakulapitā came to the Exalted one, saluted him and sat down at one side.

As he sat there, the housefather Nakulapitā addressed the Exalted One, saying: “Master, I am a broken down old man, aged, far gone in years. I have reached life’s end, I am sick and always ailing. Moreover, Master, I am one to whom, rarely comes the sight of the Exalted One and the worshipful monks. Let the Exalted One cheer and comfort me, so that it be a profit and blessing unto me for many a long day.”

The Buddha said “True it is, true it is housefather, your body is weak and burdened. For one carrying this body about, house-father, to claim but a moment’s health would be sheer foolishness. Therefore, housefather, thus should you train yourself: ‘Though my body is sick, my mind shall not be sick.’ Thus, housefather must you train yourself.”¹⁷

Body is a burden. The Buddha says that for a person carrying his body about, to claim even a moment’s health is sheer foolishness. This body which we think is healthy is not really healthy. We can fall sick anytime. Cancer might be developing now inside this body, hepatitis or some other sickness might suddenly rear its head. So the Buddha says to think that you are healthy even for a moment is utter foolishness.

¹⁷ *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.1: *Nakulapitā*.

Then Nakulapitā, the housefather, welcomed and gladly heard the words of the Exalted One, and rising from his seat he saluted the Exalted One by the right and departed. And he came to the Venerable Sāriputta, saluted him and sat down at one side.

As he sat there, the Venerable Sāriputta said to the housefather Nakulapitā: “Calm are your senses, housefather, clear and pure is your complexion. Surely today you have had pious converse face to face with the Exalted One.”

“How could it be otherwise, Master? I have just now been sprinkled with the nectar of pious converse by the Exalted One.”

“And in what way, housefather, were you sprinkled with the nectar of pious converse by the Exalted One?”

“Well, Master, I went to the Exalted One, saluted him, and sat down on one side. As I sat thus, Master, I said to the Exalted One: ‘Master, I am a broken down old man, aged, far-gone in years. I have reached life’s end, I am sick and always ailing. Moreover, Master, I am one to whom rarely comes the sight of the Exalted One and the worshipful monks. Let the Exalted One cheer and comfort me, so that it be a profit and blessing unto me for many a long day.’

‘True it is, true it is housefather, your body is weak and burdened. For one carrying this body about, housefather, to claim but a moment’s health would be sheer foolishness. Therefore, housefather, thus you should train yourself: “Though my body is sick, my mind shall not be sick.” Thus, housefather must you train yourself.’”

“But did not it occur to you, housefather, to question the Exalted One further? ‘Pray, how far, master, is body sick and mind sick? And how far, is body sick and mind not sick?’”

“I would travel far indeed, Master, to learn from the

lips of the Venerable Sāriputta the meaning of this saying. Well for me if Venerable Sāriputta should think fit to expound to me the meaning of this saying.”

“Then listen, housefather; apply your mind and listen to what I shall tell you.”

“Even so, Master,” said Nakulapitā, and listened to the Venerable Sāriputta.

The Venerable Sāriputta thus spoke: “And how is body sick, housefather, and mind sick too?

Herein, housefather, the untaught ordinary folk, who see not those who are Ariyans, who are unskilled in the Ariyan doctrine, who are untrained in the Ariyan doctrine, who see not those who are true men, who are unskilled in the doctrine of true men, who are untrained in the doctrine of the true men — these regard body as self, they regard self as having body, body as being in the self, the self as being in the body. ‘I am the body,’ they say, ‘body is mine,’ and are possessed by this idea; and so possessed by this idea, when body alters and changes, owing to the unstable and changeful nature of the body, then sorrow, pain, grief, lamentation, and despair arise in them.

They regard feeling as the self, they regard the self as having feeling, feeling as being in the self, the self as being in feeling. ‘I am feeling,’ they say, ‘feeling is mine,’ and are possessed by this idea; and so possessed by this idea, when feeling alters and changes owing to the unstable and changeful nature of feeling, then sorrow, pain, grief, lamentation, and despair arise in them.

They regard perception as the self, they regard the self as having perception, perception as being the self, the self as being in perception. ‘I am perception,’ they say, ‘perception is mine,’ and are possessed by this idea; and so possessed by this idea, when perception alters and changes owing to the unstable and changeful nature of perception, then sorrow, pain, grief, lamentation and

The Five Illusionists

despair arise in them.

Similarly with volition and consciousness. That, housefather, is how body is sick and mind is sick too.”¹⁸

Stabbed by bodily and mental pain. The ordinary folk¹⁹ regard the five aggregates as self, or as belonging to self, or as being in the self, or self as being in the five aggregates. They are attached to these aggregates and when these five aggregates change and alter because they are unstable and subject to change, then sorrow, pain, grief, lamentation and despair arise in them.

This is the meaning of a person sick in the body and sick in mind. Being sick in the body is something we cannot help because the body is subject to birth, aging, sickness and death. All beings have a body and because of the body they have to suffer bodily pain. But, if they are attached to the five aggregates, they also suffer mental pain in addition to the bodily pain. That is why for most people the body is sick, the mind is sick also.

“And how is body sick but mind not sick?

Herein, housefather, the well taught Ariyan disciple, who sees those who are Ariyans, who is skilled in the Ariyan Dhamma, well trained in the Ariyan Dhamma, who sees those who are true men, who is skilled in the doctrine of true men, well trained in the doctrine of true men, regards not body as self, regards not self as having body, nor body as being in the self, nor self as being in the body.

¹⁸ *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.1: *Nakulapitā*.

¹⁹ The definition of the untaught ordinary folk (*puthujjana*) are those who do not see *Ariyans*, who are unskilled and untrained in the *Ariyan Dhamma*. That means those who are unskilled and untrained in the doctrine of true men. True men, i.e. *sappurisa*, means those who know the true *Dhamma*.

The Five Illusionists

He says not, 'I am body.' He says not, 'body is mine,' nor is he possessed by this idea. As he is not so possessed, when body alters and changes owing to the unstable and changeful nature of the body, then sorrow, pain, grief, lamentation and despair do not arise in him.

Similarly for feeling, perception, volition and consciousness....

Thus, housefather, is body sick, but the mind not sick."

Thus spoke Venerable Sāriputta....²⁰

Freedom from mental pain is possible. So here, the well taught *Ariyan* disciple is one who associates with the *Ariyans*, and he is well trained in the *Dhamma*. He does not regard the five aggregates as 'self,' as belonging to 'self,' as being in the 'self,' or the 'self' as being in the five aggregates. He does not say that the five aggregates are me or mine. As he is not so possessed or attached by this idea, when the five aggregates change suffering, sorrow, pain, grief, lamentation and despair do not arise in him. Such a person may be sick in body, but he is not sick in mind.

That is why the Buddha says that there is a difference between an *Ariya* and a *puthujjana*. The ordinary person is stabbed by two knives. One is the knife of physical pain (bodily pain), and the other the knife of mental pain, i.e. mental torture or mental grief. The *Ariya* is only stabbed by one knife, the knife of bodily pain. The Buddha and his *Ariyan* disciples do not suffer from mental pain. When we shed the body completely, then we have no bodily pain any more. But in this very life if we understand the *Dhamma*, then mental pain can be eliminated and that is a good thing. So the understanding of the *Dhamma* is very important.

²⁰ *Sāriyutta Nikāya* 22.1: *Nakulapitā*.

THE CULPRIT 'I AM'

At Sāvatti... Thus the Buddha said:—

“Those recluses and brahmins, monks, who regard the self in diverse ways, regard it as the five aggregates of attachment or as some one of these. What five?

Herein, monks, the untaught ordinary folk who sees not those that are Ariyans... regard body as self, self as possessed of body, body as being in the self, self as being in the body... Likewise as to feeling, perception, volition and consciousness... Thus this is the view:— it has come to him (to think) ‘I am.’ Now when it has come to anyone to think ‘I am,’ there comes to pass a descent of five feeling faculties of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. Mind is the result, mind-states are the result, the ignorance-element is the result. Touched by the feeling born of contact with ignorance, there comes to the untaught ordinary folk (the view), ‘I am’; there comes (the view) ‘this same I am’; there comes (the view) ‘things will be’; there comes (the view) ‘things will have body’; (the view) ‘things will be bodiless’; there comes (the view) ‘things will be conscious’; (the view) ‘things will be unconscious’; (the view) ‘things will be neither conscious nor unconscious.’

It is just therein, monks, that the five faculties persist. But herein for the well-taught Ariyan disciple ignorance is put away and knowledge arises. Along with the fading away of ignorance and the arising of knowledge there comes to him no view that ‘I am,’ that ‘this same I am, that things will be, things will not be; things will have body, things will not have body; things will be conscious, will be unconscious, will neither be conscious nor unconscious.’”²¹

²¹ *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.47: Ways of Regarding Things.

'I am' and its fading away. In this *Sutta*, the Buddha is saying because we regard the five aggregates as 'self,' or as belonging to 'self' etc., straight away there comes the view 'I am' or 'I exist.' When you have the view 'I am' or 'I exist' then there comes a lot of other views. The Buddha calls that the proliferation of views (*papañca*).

It is very normal for people to think. When you start thinking, you start asking, "Where did I come from?" "Perhaps a creator God made me?" and "A creator God made the world," and "Where will I go when I die?" And you start to have a lot of speculation and views. This proliferation of views is due to uncontrolled mental outflows (*āsavas*). When they start flowing, they give rise to defilements and suffering. We should see clearly our thoughts for what they really are... just thoughts, imaginings, and sometimes fantasies.

It is only when a person understands the *Dhamma* deeply that he does not think "I am," or "I exist." But this state is not easy to realize. We have to put in a lot of effort in understanding the *Dhamma*, meditating and cultivating the factors of the *Ariyan* Eightfold Path. Then gradually we may come to the understanding that there is no such thing as 'I am' or a personal 'I.' When a person comes to that stage he has no more proliferation of views. He has no more all this kind of thinking.

ENDLESS FARING ON

At Sāvatti... Then the Exalted One said: –

“Incalculable, monks, is the beginning of this round of rebirths. No beginning is made known of beings wrapped in ignorance, fettered by craving, who run on, who fare on the round of rebirths.

There comes a time, monks, when the mighty ocean

dries up, is utterly drained, comes no more to be. But of beings hindered by ignorance, fettered by craving, who run on, who fare on the round of rebirths, I declare no end-making.

There comes a time, monks, when Simeru, king of mountains, is consumed, is destroyed, comes no more to be. But of beings hindered by ignorance, fettered by craving, who run on, who fare on the round of rebirths, I declare no end-making.

There comes a time, monks, when the mighty earth is consumed, is destroyed, comes no more to be. But of beings hindered by ignorance... I declare no end-making.”²²

Spiritual maturity springs from recognizing dukkha. Firstly, the Buddha says no beginning is made known of beings wrapped in ignorance who fare on the cycle of rebirths. What the Buddha means is that you cannot find a beginning of time. And there is also no end to time. This is something that only quite recently Professor Steven Hawkins has confirmed. *Samsāra*, the round of rebirths, will continue forever and it will never end. So if *samsāra* does not end, we will have to make an effort to liberate ourselves from it.

If we do not make this effort, the round of rebirths will continue and we will continue to suffer. But, the nature of life is such that as we turn in *samsāra*, and as we suffer, we learn the lessons of life. For example, when you tell a child not to play with fire, he does not listen. One day, he gets his fingers burnt. After that, you do not have to tell him not to play with fire. He will not play with fire any more. In the same way, there are many things in *samsāra* that are dangerous, that the Buddha tells us not to play with. We do not believe. Then we get our fingers burnt and suffer. Only

²² *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.99: The Leash.

then will we learn and become cautious.

So in the cycle of rebirths, we suffer. As we suffer, we learn the lessons of life. After learning the lessons of life, one lifetime after another on the round of rebirths, we become spiritually more and more mature. And when we become mature enough, then we will try to look for a way out of suffering, a way out of *saṃsāra*.

The Master awaits one who is ready. If we are sincere, one day, we will come across the true *Dhamma*. When we come across the true *Dhamma*, we learn things like the Four Noble Truths. Then we realize there is a way, there is the Noble Eightfold Path taught by the Enlightened Ones to end *saṃsāra*. In the Bible it is said, “Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you.” And there is an old Indian saying: “When the disciple is ready, the Master will appear.”

When we know that there is a way, a ray of hope is lit inside us. If we pursue it we are on our way out of *saṃsāra*. That is why the *Dhamma* is so important. Once we know it is the true *Dhamma*, we know how to turn our direction in life. Then we have a direction or goal in life to end suffering. If we are sincere, we will make progress.

THE DOOR TO RELEASE

“Just as, monks, a dog tied up by a leash to a strong stake or pillar, keeps running round and revolving round and round that stake or pillar, even so, monks, the untaught ordinary folk, who sees not those who are Ariyans... who are untrained in the Dhamma of true men, regard body as self, regard feeling, perception, volition, consciousness as self, as belonging to self, as being in the

The Five Illusionists

self, or self as being in body, feeling, perception, volition, consciousness... run and revolve round and round from body to body, from feeling to feeling, from perception to perception, from volition to volition, from consciousness to consciousness... they are not released therefrom, they are not released from birth, from old age and death, from sorrow and grief, from pain, lamentation and despair... they are not released from suffering, I declare.

But the well taught Ariyan disciple, monks, who sees them that are Ariyans... who is well trained in the Dhamma of true men, regards not body as the self... regards not self as in consciousness. He runs not, revolves not round and round from body to body... from consciousness to consciousness, but is released therefrom. He is released from birth, old age and death, from sorrow and grief, pain, lamentation and despair... I declare he is released from suffering.”²³

Training in the true Dhamma as the first step. The untaught ordinary persons go round and round in *saṃsāra*, going from body to body, feeling to feeling, perception to perception, volition to volition, and consciousness to consciousness... the never ending round of rebirths. As they go round they suffer and, one day, when they become spiritually mature enough then they look for a way out. And when they hear the *Dhamma*, that there is such a thing as the true *Dhamma*, then they come to learn the *Dhamma* and train in the *Dhamma*. And as they learn the *Dhamma*, slowly they let go of attachment for the body and mind. It is from such *suttas* that we learn about the five aggregates, helping us see the impermanent nature, the painful nature of the body and mind. As we slowly let go of our attachment for them, we will gradually release ourselves from *saṃsāra*.

²³ *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.99: The Leash.

EMPTY, INSUBSTANTIAL, WITHOUT ESSENCE

On a certain occasion the Exalted One was staying at Ayojjhāya on the banks of the river Ganges.

Then the Exalted One thus addressed the monks:—

“Just as if, monks, this river Ganges should carry down a huge lump of foam, and a keen sighted man should see it, observe it and look close into its nature. So seeing it, observing it and looking close into its nature, he would find it empty, he would find it insubstantial, he would find it without essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a lump of foam?

Even so, monks, whatsoever body, be it past, future, or present... far or near... which a monk sees, observes and looks close into its nature, he so seeing, observing and looking close into the nature of it, would find it empty, he would find it insubstantial, he would find it without essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a body?”²⁴

Simile of the foam. Here the Buddha is using the simile of a lump of foam to a body. When you stir a lot of detergent in water, you see lots of foam. A huge lump of foam in the river is just like this, consisting of a lot of bubbles... bubbles form and bubbles burst.

And the Buddha says the body is just like this, it is made up of cells, millions and millions of cells. Cells form and cells die. New cells form and old cells die. And every seven years all the cells in your body will totally change. The body is very similar to a huge lump of foam. These cells are changing all the time, there is no unchanging core or essence in the body.

²⁴ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.95: A Lump of Foam.

The Five Illusionists

“Suppose, monks, in autumn time, when the sky-god rains down big drops, a bubble rises on the water and straight away bursts, and a keen sighted man should see it, observe it, look close into its nature. So seeing it, observing it and looking close into its nature, he would find it empty, he would find it insubstantial, he would find it without essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a bubble on the water?”

Even so, monks, whatsoever feeling, be it past, future or present... far or near... which a monk sees, observes and looks close into its nature, he so seeing, observing, and looking close into the nature of it, would find it empty, he would find it insubstantial, he would find it without essence. What essence, monks, could there be in feeling?”²⁵

Simile of rain falling on water. Here, the Buddha uses the simile of rain falling on water, e.g. falling on a pond or a lake. When the raindrops fall on the pond or lake, bubbles are formed. Each drop that falls on the surface of the pond creates a bubble and the bubble forms only for a short while, and then it bursts. In the same way the Buddha says our feelings arise due to sense objects impinging on the six sense doors and pass away like bubbles. They last only for a short while and then cease.

“Just as if, monks, in the last month of the dry season at high noontide there should be a mirage, and a keen-sighted man should see it, observe it and look close into the nature of it. So observing it... he would find it to be without essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a mirage? So it is likewise with any perception....”²⁶

²⁵ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.95: A Lump of Foam.

²⁶ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.95: A Lump of Foam.

Simile of a mirage. Perception is likened to a mirage. A man in the desert who hasn't eaten or drunk for many days walking about and getting delirious from the heat imagines he sees an oasis. As he walks nearer and nearer, he realizes there is no oasis but just a mirage, something created by the mind.

Perception is similar to that. For example, the perception that someone is a very nice person, or that someone is a repulsive person is all very subjective. Or you may find a person very attractive but he may be unattractive to another person. There is no real basis in perception.

“Again, monks, suppose a man should roam about in need of heart wood, searching for heart wood, looking for heart wood, and taking a sharp axe should enter a forest. There he sees a mighty plantain-trunk (banana plant), straight up, new grown, of towering height. He cuts it down at the root. Having cut it down at the root he chops it off at the top. Having done so, he peels off the outer skin. When he peels off the outer skin he finds no pith inside, much less does he find heart wood.

Then suppose a keen-sighted man sees it, observes it, looks close into the nature of it, so observing it he would find it to be without essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a plantain-trunk?

Even so, monks, whatsoever volition, be it past, future or present... far or near... a monk sees, he finds it without essence. What essence, monks, could there be in volition?”²⁷

Simile of the banana tree. Here, volition or will-power is compared to a banana tree. When you cut a banana tree and peel the layers off you will find there is no pith inside, nothing solid or hard. In the same way when volition is

²⁷ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.95: A Lump of Foam.

The Five Illusionists

exercised, when a decision is made, we imagine there is a solid, substantial, unchanging ‘self’ inside that makes the decision. The Buddha says there is no such ‘self’ — nothing inside but an ever-changing flux of energy.

“Again, monks, suppose a conjurer or a conjurer’s apprentice should display a magical illusion on the high road, and a keen-sighted man should see it, observe it, look close into the nature of it. So seeing, he would find it empty, he would find it insubstantial, he would find it without essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a magical illusion?”

Even so, monks, whatsoever consciousness, be it past, future, or present... far or near... a monk sees, observes, looks close into its nature... so seeing... he would find it insubstantial, he would find it without essence. What essence, monks, could there be in consciousness?”²⁸

Simile of a magic show. Here the Buddha says consciousness is like a magical illusion. We see ourselves now as a human being. In another lifetime we may perhaps see ourselves as a *deva* or a *devi*. Then again, in another lifetime we may see ourselves as a ghost or as an animal.

Thus it is just consciousness conjuring up this show, like a dream. When we are in a dream, we do not know that we are dreaming. Only when we wake up, do we realize it was only a dream and there was nothing to get excited about. Similarly, this world appears real to us. One day if we are enlightened, we will realize it is just like a dream, like a magic show.

²⁸ *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.95: A Lump of Foam.

The Five Illusionists

“So seeing, monks, the well taught Ariyan disciple feels disgust at body, at feeling, at perception, at volition, at consciousness. Feeling disgust he becomes dispassionate. Feeling dispassionate, he is set free. By that release, the knowledge comes to him... ‘For life in these conditions there is no hereafter.’”²⁹

Setting oneself free. The Buddha says if we understand the real nature of the five aggregates, then we will become wearied, disgusted, and no longer attracted to the five aggregates. We will then become dispassionate and let go of attachment to them, and consequently attain liberation.

THIS IS NOT MINE, THIS AM I NOT, THIS IS NOT MYSELF

At Benares, in the Deer Park, at that time the Exalted One addressed the group of five monks:

“Body, monks, is not self. If body, monks, were the self, then body would not be involved in sickness, and one could say of body: ‘Let my body be thus; let my body not be thus.’ But, monks, inasmuch as body is not the self, that is why body is involved in sickness and one cannot say of body: ‘Let my body be thus; let my body not be thus.’

Feeling is not the self. If feeling, monks, were the self, then feeling would not be involved in sickness and one could say of feeling ‘Let my feeling be thus; let my feeling not be thus.’

Likewise with perception, volition and consciousness.”³⁰

²⁹ *Saṅḅhuta Nikāya 22.95: A Lump of Foam.*

³⁰ *Saṅḅhuta Nikāya 22.59: Anattā Lakkhana Sutta.*

The Five Illusionists

They are beyond my control, how could they be mine?! Here, the Buddha is saying the five aggregates are not really you and not really yours. If the five aggregates were you or yours, then you would have control over them.

For example, when you are young you want to grow up very fast, and even though you want to grow up very fast you can't grow up faster than the natural pace. Then one day you are grown up and you are very happy. But then you start to grow old. When you start growing old, you would like to stop the aging process, but then again you have no control over it. Especially after forty when you start to age quite fast, there is no way you can apply the brakes or will that your body not be sick. That is why the Buddha says you have no control over the five aggregates. (Similarly, in the Christian Bible, Jesus Christ said that you cannot even add one cubit³¹ to your height).

Likewise with feeling. We discriminate between pleasant and unpleasant feelings. When we have unpleasant feelings we want to end them immediately, otherwise we feel a lot of grief and sorrow. But when we have pleasurable feelings we want to prolong it. So some people take drugs or indulge in sensual pleasures, and go to all sorts of ways to prolong pleasurable feelings. But the body can't take it and if you try to prolong it too much it might 'blow your mind,' as they say. Thus feelings are also beyond our control. We cannot have only pleasant feelings as we would like to. Pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings arise and pass away according to conditions.

³¹ A cubit is a fore arm's length.

The Five Illusionists

“What do you think, monks, is body permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, lord.”

“And what is impermanent, is that pleasurable or painful?”

“Painful, lord.”

“Then what is impermanent, painful, unstable by nature, is it fitting to regard it thus: ‘this is mine; this am I; this is myself?’”

“Surely not, lord.”

“So also is it with feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. Therefore, monks, every body whatever, be it past, future or present, be it internal or external, gross or subtle, low or high, far or near, — every body should thus be regarded, as it really is, by right understanding thus, — ‘this is not mine; this am I not; this is not myself.’

Every feeling, every perception, every volition, and every consciousness must be so regarded. So seeing monks the well taught Ariyan disciple feels wearied with body, feels wearied with feeling, with perception, with volition and with consciousness. Feeling wearied he becomes dispassionate. Being dispassionate, he becomes freed. Knowledge arises that in the freed is the freed; so that he knows: ‘destroyed is rebirth; lived is the holy life; done is my task; for life in these conditions there is no hereafter.’”

Thus spoke the Exalted One, and the group-of-five monks were pleased thereat, and welcomed what was said by the Exalted One. Moreover by this teaching thus uttered the hearts of those five monks were freed from the āsavas (uncontrolled mental outflows) without grasping.³²

³² *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.59: *Anattā Lakkhana Sutta*.

The Five Illusionists

Not-self. This *Sutta* was spoken by the Buddha to his first disciples i.e. the group of five monks. After hearing this discourse, all of them attained *Arahanthood*.

The Buddha is saying the five aggregates: viz body, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness (basically body and mind) are impermanent and, because they are impermanent, they are painful. And what is painful, impermanent and unstable by nature is not fitting to regard as 'I,' 'mine,' or 'myself.'

When a person realizes this he becomes disenchanted or wearied with the five aggregates. Following that he becomes dispassionate, lets go of attachment for them, and becomes liberated.

If we take what by nature is impermanent, painful and unstable to be 'I,' to be 'mine,' to be 'myself' then we are taking up a burden, a burden of the five aggregates, a burden of suffering. Only when we let go of these five aggregates and don't take them to be 'I,' 'mine,' or 'myself,' do we let go of this burden of suffering. Only then can we be released.

How do we see the body and mind as not 'I,' not 'mine,' and not 'myself'? It is by practising the *Ariyan* Eightfold Path fully, and this includes the contemplation of body and mind — seeing that they depend on conditions, are impermanent, unstable, and are of the nature to change, sicken and die.

The body arises because of the union of father and mother. The body is dependent on food for subsistence, on suitable weather and other environmental conditions, etc.. The mind³³ depends on contact through the six sense doors, with the six sense objects. When we understand the nature of the

³³ The mind is basically feeling, perception, volition and consciousness.

body and mind, we become wearied, disenchanted and, following that, let go of the five aggregates and become freed.

At Sāvathhi...The Buddha said:—

“What is not of you, monks, put it away. Putting it away will be for your profit and welfare. And what, monks, is not of you? Body, monks is not of you. Put it away. Putting it away will be for your profit and welfare.

Feeling is not of you; perception, volition and consciousness are not of you. Put it away. Putting it away will be for your profit and welfare.

Just as if, monks, a man should gather, burn, or do what he please with all the grass, all the sticks, branches and stalks in this Jeta Grove, pray would you say ‘this man is gathering us, burning us, doing what he pleases with us?’”

“Surely not, lord.”

“Why so?”

“Because, lord, this is not our self, nor of the nature of self.”

“Even so, monks, body is not of you. Put it away. Putting it away will be for your profit and welfare. Feeling is not of you; perception, volition, consciousness are not of you. Put it away. Putting it away will be for your profit and welfare.”³⁴

Body and mind have nothing to do with us. This is an interesting Sutta. The Buddha says that the five aggregates, the body and mind, are not you, not of you, not yours. Just as if a man were to gather together all the grass, sticks and branches and burn them, you wouldn’t say that this man is gathering you, burning you, doing what he pleases with you.

³⁴ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.33: Not Yours.

Similarly with the body and mind. They have nothing to do with us. This has quite a deep meaning: saying the body and mind, which we take to be the self, have nothing to do with us. That is why earlier we read that the five aggregates are alien.³⁵

SWEPT AWAY BY THE STREAM

At Sāvatti...The Buddha said:—

“Suppose a stream, monks, a mountain-torrent, down drawing, rising from afar, swift flowing and on both its banks are growing grasses which overhang the stream, kusa-grass there might be that overhangs; reeds, creepers and overhanging shrubs; and a man is swept away by that stream and clutches at the grasses, but they might break away; and owing to that he might come by his destruction. He might clutch at the kusa-grass, at the reeds, at the creepers; he might clutch at the shrubs, but they might break away, and owing to that he might come by his destruction.

Even so, the untaught ordinary folk... regard body as self, or the body as belonging to self or the body as being in the self, or the self as being in the body. Then body breaks away, and owing to that they come by their destruction.

So too with feeling, perception, volition, consciousness: they regard these aggregates as self, or as belonging to self, or as being in the self, or self as being in the aggregates, and these break away, and owing to that they come by their destruction.

³⁵ Refer to our earlier discussion under the subtitle: ‘The empty nature of body and mind.’

The Five Illusionists

Now as to that what do you think, monks? Is body permanent or impermanent?"

*"Impermanent, Lord." "And what is impermanent...."*³⁶

"So also feeling, perception, volition, consciousness... are they permanent or impermanent?"

*"Impermanent, Lord." ...*³⁷

*"Wherefore, monks, he who sees thus... knows... there is no hereafter."*³⁸

... *but there is salvation.* This is another very beautiful simile. A man is swept away by a stream or a strong flowing river and he clutches at the grasses and creepers. But they break away, and he is swept away to his death.

Even so, we are being swept away by the current of life; the current of life sweeps us from one life to another, and we clutch at the body and mind as 'I,' 'mine,' and 'myself.' But the body and mind are impermanent and unstable by nature — they change, break away, and will come to be destroyed. In this way, we are swept away by the current of life, turning again and again in the round of rebirths because we cling to our body and mind. There is no salvation unless we let go of our body and mind, and realise that which is not impermanent, not unstable by nature — what the Buddha calls the uncreated, the unconditioned, the unborn: Nibbana.

³⁶ Here the *Sutta* repeats itself as we have earlier quoted in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.59 under the subtitle: 'They are beyond my control, how could they be mine?!'

³⁷ Again, the *Sutta* repeats itself as we have earlier quoted in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.59 under the subtitle: 'They are beyond my control, how could they be mine?!'

³⁸ *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.93: The River.

**ACCOMPLISHED IN THE DHAMMA-VINAYA:
SKILLED IN THE SEVEN POINTS**

At Sāvatti...the Buddha said:—

“A monk who is skilled in the seven points, monks, who is an investigator of the three ways, he is called ‘accomplished in this Dhamma-Vinaya,³⁹ one who has reached mastership, superman.’

And how monks, is a monk skilled in the seven points?

Herein, monks, a monk fully knows body, the arising of body, the ceasing of body and the way going to the ceasing of body. He fully knows the satisfaction that is in body, the misery that is in body, the escape from body.

He fully knows feeling in like manner, and perception, volition...

He fully knows consciousness, he fully knows the arising of consciousness, the ceasing of consciousness and the way going thereto. He fully knows the satisfaction that is in consciousness, the misery that is in consciousness, and the escape from consciousness.

And what, monks, is body? It is the four great elements, and that materiality which is derived from the four great elements. That, monks, is called body. From the arising of nutriment comes the arising of body; from the ceasing of nutriment comes the ceasing of body; and the way going to the ceasing of body is this Ariyan Eightfold Path, namely Right View, Right Thought, Right

³⁹ Notice here the Buddha says “accomplished in the *Dhamma-Vinaya*” which is the totality of the Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha always referred to his teachings as the *Dhamma-Vinaya* — he never used the word *Tipitaka* (or *Tripitaka*) which was coined much later. In the *Anguttara Nikāya* 4.180, the Buddha explains the *Dhamma-Vinaya* as the *Suttas* and the *Vinaya*; thus the Buddha’s teachings are the *Suttas* and the *Vinaya*. Refer to the book ‘Liberation: Relevance of Sutta-Vinaya’ by the author for details.

The Five Illusionists

Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Recollection, Right Concentration.

That ease, that pleasure which arises because of body, that is the satisfaction that is in body. Insofar as body is impermanent, fraught with suffering and unstable, such is the misery that is in the body. That restraint of desire and lust, that putting away of desire and lust that are in the body, such is the escape from the body.

Whatsoever recluses or brahmins, monks, by thus fully understanding body, its arising, its ceasing and the way going to its ceasing; by thus fully understanding the satisfaction, the misery, and the way of escape from the body, are practising for weariness, for dispassion, for the ceasing of the body — they are practising well. They that are practising well are firmly grounded in this Dhamma-Vinaya.

Moreover, monks, whatsoever recluses or brahmins, by thus truly understanding body, its arising, its ceasing and the way going to its ceasing... by thus fully understanding the satisfaction, the misery and the escape from body, they through weariness of the body, dispassion, the ceasing of the body are liberated without grasping; they are truly liberated... for them it may be said 'there is no more whirling round.'"⁴⁰

Here the Buddha said one is called accomplished in the *Dhamma-Vinaya* if one is skilled in the seven points, and an investigator of the three ways. Skilled in the seven points means he fully knows (i) the five aggregates, (ii) their arising, (iii) their ceasing, (iv) the way to their ceasing, (v) the satisfaction, (vi) the misery therein, and (vii) the escape therefrom. We shall now discuss some of the issues related to these seven points, starting first with the body.

⁴⁰ *Saṅḅhuta Nikāya* 22.57: The Seven Points.

The Five Illusionists

Body. We are all very attached to our body, and letting go of this body is an advanced stage of the spiritual journey.

The body: It is composed of the four great elements, and we need to understand them first in order to understand the body. The four great elements are earth, water, fire and wind. They refer not to the actual elements themselves but to their characteristics.

The earth element refers to the characteristic of hardness, e.g. when I touch this metal it is hard, so to me it is earth element.

Water element refers to the quality of cohesion, as water tends to cohere or come together. For example, it is because we have water in our body that we have a certain shape. Suppose you were to dehydrate yourself, take away all the water in your body. What happens is you cannot have this form, it will collapse. So water refers to the element of cohesion.

Fire refers to the element of heat i.e. hotness, or coldness (lack of fire element), for example digestion and metabolism.

Wind element refers to motion or movement. Because of the wind element in our body, there is movement inside our body. The food we take moves through our body; wind passes through our body, sometimes out of our mouth as we burp, or out through the anus.

Arising: From the arising of nutriment, the body arises.

Ceasing: With the ceasing of nutriment, the body ceases. The body wastes away when there is no nutriment and, after a certain number of days, the body will die.

The Five Illusionists

Way to its ceasing: The way to the permanent ceasing of the body is the *Ariyan* Eightfold path, the path that leads to the ending of suffering.

Satisfaction: The pleasure that arises from sensual contact gives rise to the satisfaction with the body.

Misery: “But insofar as the body is impermanent, unstable, fraught with suffering, that is the misery that is in body.” So we **can** get a certain satisfaction, a certain pleasure with the body but, because the body is unstable by nature, it can become sick, or grow old; then you get misery from the body.

Escape: In order not to suffer, we must put away desire and lust for the body. As long as we have desire and lust for the body we will continue to have one body after another.

When we have a body and mind, then we have to suffer for it. When we understand this, we put away our desire and lust for the body. Understanding these seven points is important as it helps us in our practice towards weariness or disenchantment, towards dispassion, towards the ceasing of the body. And the Buddha praises such persons as practising well, firmly grounded in the *Dhamma-Vinaya*. Finally, for the enlightened ones, there will be no more whirling round *saṃsāra*.

“And what, monks, is feeling?”

These six seats of feeling, namely feeling that is born of contact with eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind... this, monks, is called feeling. From the arising of contact comes the arising of feeling; from the ceasing of contact is the ceasing of feeling; and the way going to the ceasing

The Five Illusionists

of feeling is this Ariyan Eightfold Path, namely Right View, Right Thought, etc..

That ease, that pleasure which arises because of feeling — that is the satisfaction that is in feeling. Insofar as feeling is impermanent, fraught with suffering and unstable, this is the misery that is in feeling. That restraint of desire and lust, that putting away of desire and lust which are in feeling... that is the escape from feeling.

Now whatsoever recluses or brahmins, monks, by thus fully understanding feeling, its arising, its ceasing and the way going thereto; by thus fully understanding the satisfaction, the misery that is in feeling, and the way of escape from feeling, are practising for weariness, for dispassion, for the ceasing of feeling — they are practising well. They that are practising well are firmly grounded in this Dhamma-Vinaya.

Moreover, monks, whatsoever recluses or brahmins, by fully understanding these things... are truly liberated... for them it may be said 'there is no more the whirling round.'"⁴¹

Feeling is one of those things which drives us around. We know the whole economy of a country is based on getting good feeling. If you can create something that can give people good feeling then you can sell the product, e.g. CDs and DVDs. If you can create a good show that people enjoy, then people are willing to pay for it. Similarly, you can only sell your music if people like the sounds you produce. This applies to all things in life like good perfumes and delicious food. All these have to do with good feeling.

This is what makes insight into feelings so important because they are what drive living beings around, leading us to attachments and defilements.

⁴¹ *Saṅgīyutta Nikāya* 22.57: The Seven Points.

“And what, monks, is perception?

These six seats of perceiving: the perception of sight, of sound, of smell, of taste, tangible and thought... that monks, is called perception, and for those who fully understand it... ‘there is no more the whirling round.’

And what, monks, is volition?

These six seats of volition: the volition with respect to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles, and thoughts. This, monks, is called volition. From the arising of contact comes the arising of volition. From the ceasing of contact comes the ceasing of volition: and the way leading to the ceasing of volition is the Ariyan Eightfold Path.

That ease, that pleasure which arises because of volition, that is the satisfaction in volition. Insofar as volition is impermanent, fraught with suffering and unstable, such is the misery of volition. That restraint of desire and lust that are in volition, that putting away of desire and lust that are in volition: that is the escape from volition.

Whatsoever recluse(s) or brahman(s), monks, who fully understands these things, as before, for them it may be said ‘there is no more the whirling round.’

And what, monks, is consciousness?

These six seats of consciousness: seeing-consciousness, hearing-consciousness, smelling-consciousness, tasting-consciousness, touching-consciousness and thinking-consciousness.

This, monks is called consciousness. From the arising of mentality and materiality (nāma-rūpa)⁴² comes the

⁴² Consciousness here is said to arise and cease together with *nāma-rūpa* (mentality-materiality) i.e. phenomena. Consciousness cognizes an object. The object is *nāma-rūpa* which arises with consciousness. *Nāma* is actually feeling, perception, volition, contact and attention. (Notice that *nāma* does not contain consciousness, so *nāma* is not ‘mind.’ That is why *nāma-rūpa* is not ‘body and mind.’)

arising of consciousness; from their ceasing, its ceasing. The way leading to its ceasing is just that Ariyan Eightfold Path.

In this way, monks, a monk is skilled in the seven points.”⁴³

Reduce worldly contacts. The above is self-explanatory. One thing to note is because of contact you have feeling, followed by perception, followed by volition. From this we can see that the more contact there is the more active is the mind and, thus, the more opportunity for mental suffering to arise. Therefore, the spiritual aspirant reduces contact with the world as the first step in his quest to end suffering.

ACCOMPLISHED IN THE DHAMMA-VINAYA: INVESTIGATOR OF THE THREE WAYS

“And how, monks, is a monk an investigator of the three ways?

As to that, monks, a monk investigates things by way of the elements (dhātu), by way of the sense-spheres (āyatana), by way of causal happening (paticca-samuppāda).

That is how he is an investigator of the three ways.

A monk who is skilled in the seven points, monks, who is an investigator of the three ways, is called accomplished in this Dhamma-Vinaya: one who has reached mastership, superman.”⁴⁴

Firstly a monk can investigate things by way of the elements. The elements can mean the four great elements: namely,

⁴³ *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.57: The Seven Points.

⁴⁴ *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.57: The Seven Points.

earth, water, fire and wind or, alternatively, it can also mean the six elements i.e. earth, water, fire, wind, space and consciousness.

The second way of investigation is by way of the sense-spheres (*āyatana*). This involves the six sense doors, the six sense objects and the six sense consciousnesses.

Thirdly, there is investigation by way of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppāda*) of suffering — through the twelve links — how they arise and how they cease.

If a monk is skilled in the seven points and investigates by these three ways, he becomes accomplished in the *Dhamma-Vinaya*.

THE GREATER DISCOURSE ON THE MASS OF SUFFERING

“And what, monks, is the gratification in the case of body? Suppose there were a girl of the noble class or of the brahmin class or of householder stock, in her fifteenth or sixteenth year, neither too tall nor too short, neither too slim nor too fat, neither too dark nor too fair. Is her beauty and loveliness then at its height?” — “Yes, Bhante.” — “Now the pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on that beauty and loveliness are the gratification in the case of body.”⁴⁵

Body gratification.. The gratification or satisfaction in the case of form or body is the sight of someone of the opposite sex who is young and beautiful, i.e. sexually attractive. In the first few *Suttas* of the *Anguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha said that no sight... sound... smell... taste... touch... enslaves a man so much as that of a woman, and vice versa. Thus one intent

⁴⁵ *Majjhima Nikāya* 13: *Mahādukkhakkhanda Sutta*.

on the spiritual path should know the dangers of associating with the opposite sex.

“And what, monks, is the danger in the case of body? Later on one might see the same woman here at eighty, ninety, or a hundred years... aged, as crooked as a roof bracket, doubled up, supported by a walking stick, tottering, frail, her youth gone, her teeth broken, grey-haired, scanty-haired, bald, wrinkled, with limbs all blotchy. What do you think, monks? Has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger become evident?” — “Yes, Bhante.” — “Monks, this is the danger in the case of body.”⁴⁶

Danger in the body. In a short span of time we will all grow old. The beauty of youth turns to become the ugliness of old age. A lot of people cannot accept this. They dye their hair or use a wig, apply make-up or cosmetics, and even resort to surgery, in a vain attempt to hide the creeping signs of ageing and decay. In the same way, a lot of people refuse to accept and see the ugliness, the suffering and the cruelty of life. Instead they cling to the short-lived pleasures in the world, and conceptualize a merciful Creator and Savior.

“Again, one might see that same woman afflicted, suffering, and gravely ill, lying fouled in her own excrement and urine, lifted up by some and set down by others. What do you think, monks? Has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger become evident?” — “Yes, Bhante.” — “Monks, this too is a danger in the case of body.”

“Again, one might see that same woman as a corpse; thrown aside at a charnel ground; one, two, three days

⁴⁶ *Majjhima Nikāya 13: Mahādukkhakkhanda Sutta.*

dead; bloated, livid, and oozing matter. What do you think, monks? Has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger become evident?” — “Yes, Bhante.” — “Monks, this too is a danger in the case of body.”

“Again, one might see that same woman as a corpse; thrown aside at a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms... a skeleton with flesh and blood; held together with sinews... or a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews... disconnected bones scattered in all directions — here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone; here a thigh-bone, there a rib-bone; here a hip-bone, there a back-bone; here the skull... bones bleached white — the colour of shells... bones heaped up, more than a year old... bones rotted and crumbled to dust. What do you think, monks? Has her former beauty and loveliness vanished and the danger become evident?” — “Yes, Bhante.” — “Monks, this too is a danger in the case of body.”⁴⁷

Futility of attachment to the body. All these striking examples given by the Buddha bring home the point that the body is impermanent and subject to decay and death — sometimes faster than we expect. Hence the futility of our attachment to the body, which only brings with it pain and suffering.

“And what, monks, is the escape in the case of body? It is the removal of desire and lust, the abandonment of desire and lust for the body. This is the escape in the case of body.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Majjhima Nikāya 13: Mahādukkhakkhanda Sutta.*

⁴⁸ *Majjhima Nikāya 13: Mahādukkhakkhanda Sutta.*

THE WAY TO THE IMPERTURBABLE

“Monks, sensual pleasures are impermanent, hollow, false, deceptive; they are illusory, the prattle of fools. Sensual pleasures here and now and sensual pleasures in lives to come, sensual perceptions here and now and sensual perceptions in lives to come — both alike are Māra’s realm, Māra’s domain, Māra’s bait, Māra’s hunting ground. On account of them, these evil unwholesome mental states such as covetousness, ill will, and presumption arise, and they constitute an obstruction to a noble disciple in training here.”⁴⁹

Māra’s bait. The Buddha said that “... gods and humans cling to the five cords of sensual pleasure.”⁵⁰ Thus it is difficult for a person to renounce the home life to become a monk or nun. Even after renouncing, it is common for sensual desires to lead one astray from the goal of the holy life.

“... When a person is completely intent on Nibbāna, only talk concerning that interests him, and his thinking and pondering are in line with that, and he associates with that kind of person...

... Being one who really is completely intent on Nibbāna, he would not pursue those things that are unsuitable for one completely intent on Nibbāna. He would not pursue unsuitable sights... unsuitable sounds... unsuitable odours... unsuitable flavours... unsuitable tangibles... unsuitable thoughts... Because he does not pursue the sight of unsuitable forms etc... lust does not invade his mind....

⁴⁹ *Majjhima Nikāya* 106: *Āneñjasappāya Sutta*.

⁵⁰ *Majjhima Nikāya* 125: *Dantabhūmi Sutta*.

... When, Sunakkhatta, a monk practises restraint in the six bases of contact, and having understood that attachment is the root of suffering, is without attachment, liberated by the destruction of attachment, it is not possible that he would direct his body or arouse his mind towards any object of attachment.”⁵¹

Renunciation. For one to be successful in the holy life one has to completely renounce sensual or worldly pleasures both bodily and mentally, and that encompasses the letting go of the five aggregates of attachments.

PARABLE OF THE FIVE MURDERERS

... “Well said! Well said, friend Yamaka! Now I will show you a parable to show my meaning. Suppose, friend Yamaka, a housefather, or his son, a rich man, exceedingly rich and prosperous, with a strong body-guard. Then suppose some fellow desirous of his loss and harm, desirous of troubling his serenity, longing to slay him, should say to himself: ‘Here is this housefather (or housefather’s son), a rich man, exceedingly rich and prosperous; but, as he has a strong body-guard, it would not be easy to slay him by force. What if I were to work my way in and so slay him?’ Thereupon he approaches that housefather, or housefather’s son, and says: ‘I would enter your service, master.’ So that housefather, or housefather’s son, admits him to his service. And the other, by rising up early and so late taking rest, becomes a willing servant to him, eager to please and well-spoken. Then that housefather, or housefather’s son, comes to trust

⁵¹ *Majjhima Nikāya* 105: *Sunakkhatta Sutta*.

him as a friend and confidant, and thus makes a companion of him.

Now when this fellow is assured: 'This housefather, or housefather's son as it may be, is my boon companion,' then, catching him in a lonely place, he slays him with a sharp sword.

Now as to this, friend Yamaka, what think you? When that fellow went to such and such a housefather, or housefather's son, and said to him: 'I would enter your service, master.' — was he not even then a murderer? But, though he was a murderer, was not his master unaware of this fact, 'I have a murderer'? So also, when he entered his service, rose up early and late took rest, was a willing servant to him, eager to please and speaking affectionately, was he not even then a murderer, though his master knew it not?"

"He was, friend,"

"Even so friend, the untaught ordinary person who discerns not those who are Ariyans; who is unskilled in the Ariyan Dhamma, untrained in the Ariyan Dhamma; who discerns not the True Men, who is unskilled in the Dhamma of the True Men, untrained in the Dhamma of the True Men, — such a one regards body as the self, or body as belonging to the self, or body as being in the self, or the self as being in the body. Likewise with regard to feeling, perception, volition and consciousness... he understands not the impermanent body as it really is, that it is impermanent. Of the impermanent feeling he understands not, as it really is, that it is impermanent. Of the impermanent perception, of the impermanent volition... of the impermanent consciousness, he understands not, as it really is, that it is impermanent.

Of the painful body he understands not... that it is painful. And so also of feeling, perception, volition, consciousness.

The Five Illusionists

Of the selfless body he understands not, as it really is, that it is not-self... and so of feeling, perception, volition, consciousness.

Of the compounded body he understands not, as it really is, that it is a compound... and so of the other factors.

Of the murderous body he understands not, as it really is, that it is murderous... and so of the other factors.

He approaches a body, lays hold of it, and is assured: 'It is my self.' He approaches feeling, approaches perception, volition, consciousness, lays hold of it and is assured: 'It is my self.' Thus the five grasping-groups are approached and laid hold of by him, and they turn to his loss and suffering for many a long day.

But the well-taught Ariyan disciple who discerns those that are Ariyans... who is well trained in the Dhamma of the True Men... regards not the body as the self, nor the body as belonging to the self, nor the body as being in the self, nor self as being in the body. He regards not feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness in this way.

He regards the impermanent body, as it really is, as impermanent; and so does he regard the other factors... as impermanent.

He regards the painful body, the painful feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness, as painful, as they really are.

He regards the selfless body as it really is, as not-self. So also of feeling, perception, volition and consciousness.

He regards the compounded body as it really is, as a compound. So also of the other factors.

He regards the murderous body as it really is, as murderous. So also does he regard the other factors, as murderous.

He approaches not a body, lays not hold of a body, is not assured, 'I have a self,' He approaches not feeling,

The Five Illusionists

perception and the other factors, lays not hold of them, is not assured 'I have a self.'

Thus the five groups based on grasping are not approached, not laid hold of by him, and so they turn to his bliss and pleasure for many a long day."

"Even so, happy, friend Sāriputta, are those venerable ones who have such co-mates as you in the holy life, so compassionate, so anxious for their welfare, such teachers, such expounders! And now that I have heard this Dhamma-teaching from the venerable Sāriputta, my heart is released from the āsavas without any grasping."

So spoke the venerable Sāriputta, and the venerable Yamaka rejoiced thereat and welcomed the words of the venerable Sāriputta.⁵²

Deceived lifetime after lifetime. The message of this parable is that the five aggregates — which we take to be 'I' and 'mine,' and which we cherish, guard, protect, and fight to safeguard, lifetime after lifetime, as the most precious thing in the whole universe — are actually our murderers, our worst enemies, that which have deceived us... the Five Illusionists!

⁵² *Saṁyutta Nikāya 22.85: Yamaka.*

CONCLUSION

Since *dukkha* is a characteristic of life,⁵³ we very naturally turn to sensual pleasures for gratification. Unfortunately no lasting satisfaction can be attained there. The Buddha gave the simile of a dog driven by the pangs of hunger to chew a fleshless bone. In spite of his effort, not only does he fail to satisfy his burning hunger, on the contrary he becomes even hungrier after expending his energy. Similarly the flames of sensual desire burn us, and as we indulge in sensual pleasures we obtain only temporary respite and the flames increase rather than decrease. The Buddha taught that sensual desire is a disease, illustrating it with the striking simile of the leper.⁵⁴

The Buddha said that even one who knows the *Dhamma* and understands that sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and how great is the danger in them, he may still be attracted to sensual pleasures⁵⁵ as long as he has not attained the bliss of meditative absorption (*jhāna*).

The attainment of this ‘out-of-this-world’ bliss is the only way to douse the burning flames of sensual desire. Also, the state of meditative absorption enables us to get rid of the five hindrances (*nivāraṇa*) which envelop and prevent us from seeing things as they really are. Thus the spiritual path to liberation from suffering includes the study of the Buddha’s words (*Suttas*), and the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path which has to culminate in the attainment of *jhāna* for full enlightenment to be possible.⁵⁶

~ *Ciraṁ Tiṭṭhatu Saddhammo* ~

⁵³ See ‘Message of the Buddha’ by the author.

⁵⁴ *Majjhima Nikāya* 75: *Māgandiya Sutta*.

⁵⁵ *Majjhima Nikāya* 14: *Vanapattha Sutta*.

⁵⁶ See ‘Mindfulness, Recollection and Concentration’ by the author.