



# The Five Aggregates

Buddhist thought asserts that the person is composed of five sets of functioning parts called aggregates (*skandhas*).

**Material form** (*rupa*) is defined as being susceptible to damage and deterioration; and being resistant in the way an object resists another object occupying the same place. This aggregate includes the five sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body) as well as the five sense objects to which they relate: visible forms, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile objects. The material world is constituted of the four elements of earth, water, fire and wind.

**Feeling-tone** (*vedana*) is either pleasurable, painful or neutral. It refers to sensations derived from contact between the five senses and their objects. It is the feeling tone of all experience.

**Ideation** (*samjñā*) is sometimes translated as 'perception' or as 'discernment'. It refers to the mental action of apprehending the characteristics of what we perceive. For example, we accurately discern specific entities as blue, yellow, long, short, male, female and so on and label them accordingly.

**Mental formations** (*samkara*) comprises dozens of factors that play active roles in directing our mind to its objects and to action. This aggregate includes factors that are the results of past karma and that, once active in this life, produce future karmic results.

**Consciousness** (*viññāna*) is defined as the specific cognition of each object. In most Buddhist traditions the fifth aggregate includes six consciousnesses in all: the five sense consciousnesses related to seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching respectively, as well as the mental consciousness whose objects are thoughts.

## Questions

1. What are the five aggregates?
2. Which aggregates relate to the body and which aggregates relate to the mind?
3. Explain how feeling-tone and perception function.
4. Explain why mental formations mean that we are not free to make choices and decisions.
5. Do you find this a good way to account for the existence of a person?
6. How does the five aggregates analysis of a person compare with the Christian understanding of a person?



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