



The Buddhist theory of persons

Chariots are used as an example to explain the no-self of inanimate objects, but in *The Questions of King Milinda* Nagasena extends the example to cover animate objects as well, namely human beings or persons.

“Your Majesty has spoken well about the chariot. It is just so with me. In dependence on the thirty-two parts of the body and the five skandhas there takes place this denomination ‘Nagasena’, this designation, this conceptual term, a current appellation and a mere name. In reality, however, this person cannot be apprehended.”

In this passage, Nagasena outlines the Buddhist concept of a person. Persons have no unchanging, permanent, inherent essence or soul. They have no intrinsic identity, instead they are entirely dependent on the various parts that make them up. In fact, our names (Nagasena, Harry, Sue and so forth) do not refer to any separate reality but merely to the sum of these parts functioning in a particular way. There isn't really any particular entity that can be called Dominique Side; the fact that I think there is, in Buddhist terms, is my delusion and one of the main reasons that I am not already enlightened! We do not exist in the way we think we do, and gaining an experiential understanding of the 'no-self' of persons is perhaps the most important single attainment on the path to enlightenment.

What we call an individual or person, according to Buddhist philosophy, is a combination of ever-changing physical and mental energies, which can be divided into five groups technically called 'aggregates' or *khandhas* (*skandhas*). **These five aggregates are form, feeling-tone, perception, mental formations and consciousness.** Together they constitute the person: the body and mind of a human being.

The Buddha has said that 'in short, these five aggregates of attachment are *dukkha*,' and again, 'What is *dukkha*? It should be said that it is the five aggregates of attachment.' He clearly identifies *dukkha* with the aggregates, so suffering and these five aggregates are not two separate things. This is because each aggregate is a focus or object of our grasping and attachment, and according to Buddhism grasping is one of the main causes of suffering. The way they function, then, is that each one of us grasps at one or other of the aggregates, or all the aggregates combined, and mistakenly identifies with that as 'me', 'I' or 'mine.' It is therefore helpful to examine the aggregates in some detail.

Form or Matter

The first aggregate is translated as form or matter, and it refers to our body as well as the physical world. It includes our bodies, our sense organs, and the objects we perceive in the external world. This aggregate is itself composed of the physical elements (earth, water, fire, and air).

Feeling-tone

The second aggregate refers to all the sensations that are experienced through the contact of the sense organs with the objects they apprehend. We should note that this aggregate refers to the feeling-tone of each experience and not feelings in the sense of emotions. Feeling-tones can be either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. In Buddhist psychology, there are six senses and not five as in Western thought. The



six senses include the usual five – eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body – plus the mind considered as a sense in its own right. Each sense organ apprehends only sense objects related to it so, for example, the eyes can see form but they cannot hear sound. The objects apprehended by the mind are thoughts and feelings.

Perceptions

Like sensations, perceptions are produced through the contact of the sense organs with the external world, but perceptions recognize objects. Perception is the faculty of identifying objects as mental or physical, as a table rather than a chair, and so on, and involves an initial process of conceptualising and categorizing sense data. Perceptions recognise, identify and classify, and play the important role of putting sensory experience into words.

Mental formations

This aggregate groups together different mental factors. The most significant cover volitional activity, that is, any activity that involves will power, intention or determination. Crucially, mental formations concern *kamma* (*karma*) because, in Buddhism, the moral effects of action are determined primarily by the intentions behind those actions. The aggregate of mental formations thus covers the mental conditioning that results from karma accumulated in previous lives as well as earlier in this life; this colours the way we understand and react to situations, and it shapes our personality and character. At the same time, this aggregate includes mental activity that produces new karmic effects – activity such as attention, determination, confidence, concentration, desire, hatred and pride: these are all examples of ‘mental formations’. They are called ‘mental formations’ because they condition us and ‘shape’ (or give form to) our lives.

Consciousness

In this context, consciousness refers to a mental reaction or response that has one of the six sense faculties as its basis. For example, visual consciousness has the eye faculty as its basis and a visible form as its object. The aggregate of consciousness is connected with each one of the sense faculties. It does not recognise objects, it is more of an awareness of the presence of an object. So, when the eye comes into contact with a blue object, for example, visual consciousness is the awareness of the presence of a colour but it does not recognise that it is blue. It is perception, the third aggregate, that recognises it as blue. Seeing is not the same as recognising.

In addition, the aggregate of consciousness plays a coordinating role between the sense channels so that in any given situation we perceive sights, sounds, smells and so on in an integrated picture and not separately with no connection between them. Consciousness is therefore the faculty of making overall sense of what we perceive, in collaboration with the other aggregates, and the way we do this constitutes our mentality or mind set.

Based on *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side



Questions

1. What are the five aggregates?
2. How do the aggregates work together?
3. Are the aggregates a satisfying description of a person in your view?



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