

The Interdependent Arising of Feeling

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Today we are turning our attention to the second of the aggregates, the aggregate of feeling. Before we get very far, however, we will need to appreciate the fact that the Buddhists are using this word quite differently than we usually do in English.

Our understanding of the word “feeling” has been molded considerably by the Greek influence upon Western civilization. The Greek philosophers tended to divide the person into three parts. First there are the appetites, the raw drives like hunger, thirst and sex. Then there are emotions, which would include such feelings as love and kindness, hatred and jealousy. The third part of the soul was intellect, a clarified aspect of mind that could aspire to the sacred through the development of reason. So it is to the Greeks we owe the contemporary impulse to distinguish a rational, content-laden discriminating intellect from the emotive, affect-laden sentiments that is summed up by the colloquial division between “heart” and “mind.” Nothing in Asian civilization really mirrors this separation, and we have to keep that in mind as we use this word “feeling.” It does not refer to the complex emotional life of humans (most of which would be considered part of the aggregate of formations).

In the languages of ancient India, the word for feeling is **vedana**, which is ultimately a form of the root *vid*, which means “to know.” The word “Veda,” a name for the ancient revealed wisdom books of the Brahmanical tradition, comes from the same linguistic root, as does one element of the name for the ancient medical tradition Ayur-veda (which literally means “knowledge of life”). Another form of the root is reflected in words such as “**vidya**” which means knowledge, perhaps better known to you in its negative Pali equivalent “**avijja**,” or “ignorance.”

What all this tells us is that the Buddhists talk about feeling as a quality of knowledge, rather than as a kind of emotion. Moreover, it is a very special or precise kind of knowing, the knowing whether something in our experience is pleasant or unpleasant. It’s not knowing in the sense of cognitive content; it’s not knowing anything about something; it’s just knowing something to be pleasant, not pleasant, or a third category, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It is therefore a word that is used to refer to direct experience. I don’t want to overemphasize this point, because we’re going to put this word “know” to better use when we get to the aggregate of consciousness. But it does point out how, in these early Indian models of psychology, feeling and knowing are so thoroughly intertwined with one another that the distinction between them is very nuanced—and it’s a nuance we cannot fully appreciate when we use the English language.

A modern term used by psychologists to indicate the feeling dimension of experience is “affect tone.” We are beginning to appreciate much more than formerly the importance of the role affect plays in guiding and molding our behavior and our beliefs. Everything we do or say or think comes packaged with a feeling tone—we either like it (a lot or very subtly), or dislike it (a lot or very subtly); in cases where the experience is not distinct enough or not clearly enough known, we may be unsure whether we like or dislike it. In this case we still have a feeling, but it is not resolved into the two poles of pleasant or unpleasant. The point of the Buddhist teaching of the aggregates is that this affect or feeling tone is not something we decide upon, based upon some sort of cognitive analysis of sense objects; rather it is built in to every moment of experience—whether we like it or not!

The Arising of Experience

The first text I would have us look at is one that points to a very important aspect of feeling and of all the aggregates—the fact that they are interdependently arisen. Paragraph 27 of the **Maha Hatthipadopama Sutta** (MN 28; Middle Length Sayings p. 283), *The Greater Simile of the Elephant’s Footprint*, describes the way the aggregates emerge from a moment’s unique, contextualized experience. Remember the point we emphasized yesterday: The aggregates are not substances that exist; they are terms referring to events that occur. They are conceptual categories we can use to describe episodes of interdependently arisen experience. This text shows us how this works.

No doubt you recall the chart of the sense bases or sense doors: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind are six sense organs that have evolved to be sensitive to the six corresponding classes of sense objects we call forms, sounds, odors, flavors, touches and mental phenomena. The passages we are looking at now

are emphasizing the fact that experience can only occur when these sense organs and sense objects complete a circuit, as it were, with consciousness, which will also manifest in six different modes to correspond to the six internal and external sense spheres. Another way of saying this is to recognize that subjective human experience only occurs (remember it is an event!) when all three functions of a triangle are joined: the organ, the object and consciousness.

If, friends, internally the eye (ear, nose, etc.) is intact but no external forms (sounds, odors, etc.) come into its range, and there is not corresponding [conscious] engagement, then there is no manifestation of the corresponding class of consciousness.

This section describes a situation where the link between sense organ and sense object is insufficient. If your eye is working properly, but there is some environmental reason for your not being able to see forms (if your eyes are closed, for example, or the room is too dark) then you don't see forms, even though you may be right in front of one. The eye can't see the Eiffel Tower, which is on the other side of the globe, because it's not in proximity. In either case the link between the perceptual organ and the perception object, the eye and the forms is not functioning. Also keep in mind that by eye they do not mean merely the eyeball, of course, but the entire visual system (cornea, retina, optic nerve, visual cortex, etc.); there is also the issue of the eye being sensitive to certain wavelengths of the light spectrum and not others. Other limitations apply to the other senses of hearing, smell, taste, touch and mental phenomena.

What would be an example of an insufficient link between the mind and mental phenomena? Perhaps it's like the situation when you are trying to remember a friend's phone number, or the name of an acquaintance, and you just cannot make the connection. You know the information is stored in memory someplace, but try as you might you can't bring that particular mental object to mind in the moment. Here is another reason the system might not work:

If internally the eye is intact and external forms come into its range, but there is no corresponding [conscious] engagement, then there is no manifestation of the corresponding class of consciousness.

In this case the external factors are okay, but we are in some important way not attending to a particular object. You might be asleep, for example, or you've been knocked unconscious; or you might simply be thinking about something else. If you are so intent on what you're listening to, for example, you may not be paying attention to what is passing before your eyes. In that case, then there is no corresponding conscious engagement, and there is no manifestation of the corresponding section of consciousness. The loop between the ear, sounds and auditory consciousness might be operative, but while it is so the loop between the eye, forms and visual consciousness is not complete, because consciousness is engaged at the other sense door. The system does not allow one to be conscious of two types of object at once.

This point is itself counter-intuitive, because it certainly seems to us that we can be aware of data coming through several of the sense doors simultaneously. According to this early Buddhist analysis, however, that sense of simultaneity is only the result of the rapidity with which we are able to cycle between the sense doors. Using some modern language from the cognitive sciences, we might say that our basic sensory apparatus is processing a huge amount of data in parallel systems that function independently and therefore simultaneously. While a nerve impulse is passing up my arm from the sensors on my fingers, another impulse can at the same time be racing up my optic nerve from the retina. And a mind-boggling number of other signals may also be surging through my nervous system shuttling their information from arrays of receivers to banks of processors.

But the subjectively-based science of human experience discovered by the ancient Buddhists through meditation is telling us that conscious awareness is something that can only happen by means of serial processing. Our short-term memory and forward and backward masking techniques are adequate to retrieve information from the senses that we had not been attending to, as when a teacher asks a day-dreaming pupil what was just said and the pupil somehow manages to repeat the teacher's words. But this is not the same as conscious engagement with the present object of experience. You all know the difference between feeling really heard and attended to by someone who is focusing on what you say and being on the periphery of someone's sensory range who may be only politely attentive.

But when internally the eye is intact and external forms come into its range and there is the corresponding [conscious] engagement, then there is the manifestation of the corresponding class of consciousness.

In the situation being described here the connection is made between these three functions of the system: the visual organ, the visual object and the process of conscious engagement. The Pali word for this connection is **phasso** which literally means "touching" and is usually translated as "contact." I prefer

the word “experience,” because that is really what emerges from the completion of the sensory systems—a moment’s unique experience.

Insight Into the Moment

There is something truly astonishing about this analysis of human experience, something that I think is unparalleled in world religions. Notice that with this use of language, it is not possible to talk about consciousness as a noun. It is not something that somebody or something either has or does not have; it is not something that somebody is or is not; it can only be understood as an event, an episode, a momentary occurrence. And this event is entirely contextualized—it arises in interdependence with an particular organ and a very specific object; and having arisen, it immediately passes away. Having passed away, it may immediately arise (or better, occur) again, but when it does it will be in interdependence with a different organ and a different object. Even if the eye is seeing the same form for several mind moments in a row, the truth of impermanence is such that the experience will not be exactly the same each time. Perhaps the light has changed subtly, or the angle of presentation is slightly different, or one is in a somewhat altered mood at the moment of awareness.

Furthermore, according to this model, consciousness alone will never be sufficient to generate experience. Consciousness can only manifest as consciousness of something, and it has to use one of the six sense organs to become conscious of one of the six types of sense object. Now I’m sure many of you have heard such phrases as “pure consciousness” or “consciousness that takes no object,” but these expressions come either from other traditions (such as Hinduism) or from strata of Buddhist tradition quite a bit more evolved historically and doctrinally than what is found in the Pali Canon. In the model being presented in this text, it becomes clear that consciousness is just one element of a larger system of cognition, which therefore becomes unintelligible if removed from its role in the system. A carburetor, for example, only does what a carburetor does when it is properly installed in an engine and cooperates with a fuel system and an ignition system in a very particular way. In the same way, human experience only occurs when all five aggregates are co-arising in a moment’s constructed cognition. None of the aggregates can be separated from the others and retain its intelligibility as a factor independent of the system of which it is a part.

Why is all this coming up in the context of feeling? Because we cannot really understand what is being referred to as feeling unless we grasp this fundamental aspect of the five aggregate model—feeling arises only in thorough interdependence with the other aggregates. As our text goes on to say:

The material form in what has thus come to be is included in the material form aggregate affected by clinging. The feeling... perception... formations... consciousness in what has thus come to be is included in the feeling... perception... formations... consciousness aggregate affected by clinging.

This is a very important phrase: “what has thus come to be.” Each of the aggregates is emerging, moment after moment, as the process of the construction of reality unfolds in a particular psycho-physical organism. Our entire experience as human beings is made up of moments of these constructed experiences. If we look closely enough—and mindfulness meditation gives us the tools for accomplishing this—we will see it unfold: a moment of visual experience (seeing the swirl of a pattern on your closed eyelid, for example); followed by a moment of auditory experience (the chirp of a bird outside the meditation hall); followed by a moment of tactile experience (that throb of pain in your knee, perhaps); followed by a moment of mental experience (“I wonder what’s for lunch?”)...

We string these moments of experience, these moments of sensory connection, together with the construction of subjective time, and a stream of consciousness appears to emerge: moment after moment after moment of knowing. Knowing this (the bird), then knowing that (the knee pain), then knowing the next thing (the thought of lunch). When you put a million or two of these together, you begin to build up a few moments of subjective experience. Then you can begin to discern patterns in the specific ways you go about constructing the experiential stream, certain habits or dispositions that effect the construction process. These patterns are called *sankharas* or formations. They are referred to in our colloquial language as personality, character, or self.

This is what is happening. This is what our lives, our worlds, our very selves are made up of. How much of it can you see? For most of us, most of the time, we are able to really notice only a fraction of this unfolding universe. Mindfulness practice is training ourselves to see more of it, and you can get a sense of more and more of the universe emerging as you pay closer and closer attention to the process. In the **Anupada Sutta** (M 111) the Buddha’s great disciple Sariputta is said to have had “insight into states one by one as they occurred” for days and even weeks at a time.

The last line we will look at in this particular text sort of sums it all up:

This, indeed, is how there comes to be the inclusion, gathering, and amassing of things into these five aggregates affected by clinging... And these five aggregates affected by clinging are dependently arisen.

Returning to the issue of feeling, we see from this model that feeling is something transient, arising and passing away moment after moment, and we see that it is content- and context-specific. A feeling can only be understood in relation to a particular object sensed by a particular organ in a particular moment of conscious experience. The affect tone of “liking this” or “not liking that” is as variable, and comes and goes as regularly, as experience itself.

The Construction of Reality

It is not the case that we have a “raw” experience, and then we examine the data to see what it is we “perceive;” then consult the archives to see how it is we “feel” about this experience. What the aggregate model is suggesting is that perception and feeling are bound up with every moment’s experience during the process of constructing that experience. As the experience arises from its specific conditions, as part of the construction process wrought by the mind, the aggregates of perception and feeling are “amassed.” The way this is put in the **Madhupindika Sutta** (*The Honey Ball Discourse*, M 18) is:

Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives.

This process, as I understand it, does not happen as an unfolding sequence. It is not that we have a moment’s experience, and then somehow decide what it is and decide how we feel about it. Rather, the experience is presented to our awareness with the perception and feeling already woven in with the sense data and its cognition. We “know” how it feels, just like we “know” what it is (perception), at the very same moment we “know” a visual object is arising via the visual organ into the moment’s visual consciousness. This insight, by the way, parallels the modern scientific view that the brain is organized into separate cognitive and affective systems, through which we become aware of “what” we’re experiencing through a different channel than we become aware of “how we feel about” it.

So every moment of our experience has to do with the binding together of all kinds of interdependent relationships. Then, as soon as that moment has occurred, it’s gone—because it is, after all, only an event. All of “what has thus come to be” can be viewed as the enacting of an event—a flash, a spark—again and again and again. A cognitive, affect-laden system for constructing experience is enacting itself over and over, at sufficient levels of coherence and complexity that we regard it as a “self” and a “world.” But the self is not some sort of entity that is kind of underlying or overlying all these moments of experience. The self too is created and re-created every moment, following the patterns of its accumulated conditioning (also known as karma).

All this is understood in the Buddhist models of experience, and it is against this backdrop that feeling needs to be understood. When we hold on to feelings, relating to them as if they were somehow defining our very identity, then the conditions are present for the construction of suffering. But when, through mindfulness, we can simply observe the coming and the going of specific feeling tones—and see how this occurs in dependence on specific conditions—the entire process becomes more de-personalized. Freedom from suffering rests upon this intuition into the selflessness of the process.