

The Form, Sensation, Perception, and Formation Aggregates

The form, sensation, perception, and formation aggregates (skandhas) are four of the five aggregates. The form aggregate refers to our physical body. Everything in our body that is made of the four great elements belongs to the form aggregate. The four great elements are the earth, water, fire, and wind. The earth element refers to any substance that is hard and tough, including our bones, teeth, internal organs, etc. The water element refers to the moist parts of our physical body such as our blood. The fire element refers to the warmth in our body such as our body temperature and the energy. The wind element refers to the moving aspect of our physical body such as our breathing.

When told about the illusory nature of the form aggregate, ordinary people may question, “Doesn’t our physical body actually exist? Why is the form aggregate illusory?” Everyone knows the fact that the physical body will age and cease to exist eventually, but they fail to see that the physical body is illusory (impermanent) in the present moment. Aging and death do not occur suddenly at the very moment just before death; they have been in progress every moment since we were born. However, our conscious mind fails to perceive that.

From the viewpoint of the confluence of causes and conditions, the physical body requires a safe environment, and the intake of all sorts of nutrients to maintain its healthy existence. These causes and conditions are always changing. Therefore, whether it is from the viewpoint of impermanence or the confluence of causes and conditions, the existence of physical body is neither permanent nor real.

There is a famous quote in the *Diamond Sūtra*, “All forms are illusory. Seeing all forms as signlessness, one sees the Tathagata.” These “forms” include all the various forms in the earth, water, fire, and wind elements. Therefore, whether it is the energy in a body or the “bright drops in the central channel” that are emphasized and attached to heavily in Tantric Buddhism, they are just forms and are nothing but variations of the form aggregate. They are illusory and unreal, and should not be attached to.

What is the sensation aggregate? Sensation refers to one’s perception and environmental experience. The sensations that one experiences in the world all fall within the scope of the three sensations—painful, pleasant, and neither painful nor pleasant

feelings. If one observes and pays attention to our experiences carefully, one will realize that during every moment of a sensation, one of the three sensations always exists.

Why are sensations illusory and unreal? Take eating when hungry as an example. One feels happy at the beginning. After eating for a while, the happy feeling will gradually subside. When one is already full but is forced to continue to eat, the happy feeling will turn into suffering. Our sensations change continuously due to our contact with the external environment. Therefore, one can ascertain through direct perception that sensations are indeed impermanent.

From the viewpoint of the confluence of causes and conditions, there are two necessary conditions for the arising of a sensation: the current manifested state (object) and the subject that senses. For a sensation or feeling to arise, there must be a current manifested state and contact with this state. As the manifested state is always changing and impermanent, so is the subject that senses. The sensation itself is impermanent and continuously changing; it does not have a permanent and real existence.

At a coarse level, the perception aggregate refers to what we want to do. Take our desire to eat as an example. When we are hungry, we want to eat; once we are full, we want to stop eating. Our desire to eat changes according to the fullness of our stomach. Similarly, we may want to take a stroll; after walking for a while, we start to feel tired and want to stop walking. Therefore, perception itself is in fact impermanent and constantly changing; it is not permanent and does not exist independently.

The more subtle level of the perception aggregate refers to knowing or awareness: knowing the environment, knowing the current states and sense-objects, etc. One has to have a refined mind and be very attentive to notice this subtle aspect of perceptions. Some Buddhist practitioners mistakenly think that they have attained the state of “meditative absorption of nonperception” when they arrive at a stage that is void of any discursive thoughts. This is a huge misunderstanding. The meditative absorption of nonperception can be attained only when one further eliminates the perceptive mind after having achieved the fourth dhyana, during which the heartbeat and breathing will temporarily cease. This high level of meditative skill cannot be accomplished simply through the superficial meditation practice of eliminating discursive or illusory thoughts.

The formation aggregate includes physical, verbal, and mental formations (acts). Physical and verbal formations refer to movements of the body and uttering of speech,

respectively. They involve bodily movements and speaking through coordinating one's mouth and tongue. Therefore, they are highly dependent on the form aggregate, which is a prerequisite for one to be able to perform physical and verbal acts. Since the form aggregate is impermanent and not real, the physical and verbal formations are therefore impermanent and not real.

Mental formations are the acts of making decisions. Let us take the example of eating mentioned previously. We decide to eat one type of food in one moment, and then decide to eat another type in the next moment, and eventually decide to stop eating because we are full. All these decisions change constantly as our intentions change; this is impermanence. From the point of view of the confluence of causes and conditions, mental formations are the momentary evaluations and decisions made based on all kinds of conditions that arise in different environments. They will change as the environment changes; hence, the existence of formation aggregate is inevitably not real. Therefore, the formation aggregate is illusory and not real.

Another subtle aspect of the formation aggregate involves the very subtle physical formations such as breathing, heartbeats, etc., that are signs of life. Any volitional thoughts arising in the mind also belong to the subtle aspect of the mental formation.

In summary, through direct observation, one can see that the aggregates of form, sensation, perception, and formation are impermanent dharmas. Through thorough and further analysis, one can see that they are also condition-arisen dharmas created by the confluence of causes and conditions. These conditions themselves are all impermanent. Therefore, the aggregates of form, sensation, perception, and formation do not constitute real existence but are illusory. If a practitioner can directly witness and truly understand the illusory nature of these aggregates, he will not take the unreal as real. He can then benefit from the meritorious qualities derived from liberation. Moreover, he can further explore the true reality of life that exists behind the aggregates of form, sensation, perception, and formation. Therefore, the thorough and correct understanding of the form, sensation, perception, and formation aggregates is a prerequisite for striding towards liberation and eventually attaining Buddhahood.