

The Consciousness Aggregate and Its Nature of Neither-Self-Nor-Self-belongings

The five aggregates (skandha) are the form, sensation, perception, formation and consciousness aggregates. The first four—the form, sensation, perception, and formation aggregates—operate based on the consciousness aggregate and are the foundation that facilitates the intensification and growth of the consciousness aggregate. There is a term, “Four Dwellings of Consciousness,” which means that the consciousness aggregate dwells within the form, sensation, perception, and formation aggregates. Hence, the scope of the function of the consciousness aggregate is the most expansive and subtle among the five aggregates.

The consciousness aggregate encompasses the six consciousnesses—of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mental consciousness. The eye consciousness differentiates color and brightness of form objects. The ear consciousness distinguishes the volume and pitch of a sound. The nose consciousness differentiates the fragrance or stench of a smell. The tongue consciousness discerns the various tastes of sourness, sweetness, bitterness, spiciness, saltiness, and plainness. The body consciousness differentiates the sensations of temperature, softness, texture, and wetness of tactile objects. The mental consciousness discerns the more subtle and in-depth qualities in the five sense objects, which are sometimes described as mental objects or mental phenomena.

The first five consciousnesses rely on the mental consciousness to manifest and arise. For instance, the eye consciousness sees the color and brightness while the mental consciousness discerns the size, shape, and distance, etc., of the form objects. Likewise, the ear consciousness hears the volume of the sound while the mental consciousness discerns the harmonization of the sound, and the kind of musical instruments by which the sound is produced, etc. The nose consciousness smells the fragrance while the mental consciousness identifies the kind of fragrance—whether it is from flowers or vegetables. The tongue consciousness tastes sourness, sweetness, bitterness, spiciness, saltiness, and plainness while the mental consciousness differentiates the kind of taste—whether it is chocolate, hot cocoa, etc. The body consciousness senses roughness or softness while the mental consciousness identifies what the tactile sensation feels like. The first five consciousnesses arise along with the mental consciousness simultaneously; the first five consciousnesses differentiate the five sense objects directly while the mental consciousness discerns the five sense objects in a much more subtle fashion.

The rise of the consciousness aggregate requires three conditions: (1) the sense faculties must be functional, (2) the sense objects have to be present, and (3) the sense faculties must come in contact (touch) with the sense objects. It is the confluence and synergy of these three dharmas—the sense faculties, the sense objects, and contacts—that give rise to the consciousnesses. Each of the five sense faculties of the corresponding consciousnesses has its own external and internal sense faculties, which are parts of our body—material factors (material dharmas). The mental faculty is associated with the mental consciousness, which discerns only mental factors (mental dharmas).

Why is the consciousness aggregate not real? Since the consciousness aggregate must rely on the confluence and synergy of the sense faculties, sense objects, and contacts for it to arise, one shall contemplate whether these three factors are real and everlasting. Let's examine the sense faculties first. The first five sense faculties of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body belong to the form aggregate—our whole body. The body is continually aging and will decrease eventually; therefore, the five sense faculties are not everlasting. The mental faculty cannot exist alone and is illusory and deceptive in nature; thus, it is not everlasting either.

With regard to the sense objects, which include the form, sound, smell, taste, and touch objects that associate with the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, they belong to the form aggregate, and, therefore, are not everlasting either. As for the mental object (phenomenon) that associates with the mental consciousness, it cannot be separated from the discerning function of the first five consciousnesses; therefore, the mental phenomenon is not independent or everlasting either. As for contact, a sense faculty and a sense object must be allowed to come into contact with each other, without any barrier between them, to complete the process of a contact. Therefore, the sense faculties, sense objects, and contacts are all transitory in nature. Hence, the consciousness aggregate, which is the product of the confluence and synergy of the three factors, must be impermanent in nature.

Why is the consciousness aggregate considered “neither-self-nor-self-belongings”? Because the consciousness aggregate cannot exist by itself and will cease to exist eventually, it is not the real and everlasting “self.” Hence, it is said to be “neither-self.” Nor can the consciousness aggregate be claimed as “mine” or “belonging to a self” because the consciousness aggregate is exactly what sentient beings have perceived as “self” and not what sentient beings have possessed. Therefore, the consciousness aggregate is said to be “nor-self-belongings.”

The above is an exposition of the consciousness aggregate and its nature of non-self-nor-self-belongings.

