

# The First Noble Truth — Conditioned States

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 19:59

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When we look at any object in the world, be it natural or man-made, we tend to see it as a whole, a total or integral thing. Take for instance the car. We see it parked or moving, we see it as an object in itself, we see it as one substantial thing. But this is just a concept. We lose sight of the fact that it's made up of parts. It's only when the car breaks down that we remember, or perhaps realise for the first time if we're not mechanically minded, that it is an object made up of many other objects, all in relationship to each other. Only when all these pieces are assembled do we call it a car.

The petrol pump is hidden away, hardly known by most drivers. Suddenly the car stops. We call the services. The mechanic says, "It's the petrol pump." We realise this little object is crucial to the well-being of the car. We realise that this car we once took as a whole and entire is simply an intricate relationship of parts to parts.

This might be a layman's view of a car, but specialists may see it in a different light. The mechanic sees it as transmission and bodywork. The metallurgist as a collection of different materials: metals, plastics, natural substances such as wood and rubber. Scientists see it as molecular structures or subatomic particles, whatever. The point is that the car can be pulled apart and heaped into different piles depending on how you look at it, how you perceive it.

When it comes to the human being, it is astounding how many ways this poor being has been divided and subdivided. Every religious, philosophical and psychological school East and West has its own definition or division of the human being. In the West, materialist biologists and behavioural psychologists see the human as simply a collection of physical parts. Mind or personality is simply brain, grey matter indeed. Freudians categorise humans as a process moving from one stage of development to another. Social psychologists and sociologists see the person in terms of relationship to others. Christianity and Islam say that it's more than just a body and mind. They posit an everlasting soul.

Ever since the philosopher Descartes in the 17th century, we in the West have looked upon the human being essentially as a machine. Only recently have scientists begun to look at the human as an integrated circuit in holistic terms, rather than just a set of parts that happen to be together but work independently. The list of categorizations is endless.

Now, as for the Buddha's point of view, everything arises from his own self-designated area of teaching. Whatever he knew about the human being, he confined what he said to the noble truths and to his aim to teach only the fact of suffering and the end of suffering. For the Buddha, it was of paramount importance to be able to pinpoint for people where their suffering arose and what in fact constituted suffering, so that

the way or path leading to the end of suffering would be made clear to the listener. He simply wasn't interested in anything else. So, when we read the teachings of the Buddha, it's important to keep in mind what angle he's coming from.

The Buddha divided the human being into what is known as the five *khandha*, translated as aggregates and sometimes a little unkindly as heaps. So, just as the metallurgist might divide the car into metals, plastic, rubber, glass and oils, the Buddha divided the human being into matter, sensations, perceptions, volitional formations and consciousness. And each category is to be seen as a heap of similar things, like five distinct scrap yards.

Now, at base, the human is made of two separate phenomena: matter and mind. Matter is the body itself, the bones, muscles, blood and so on, including brain. But mind is different from matter, a more subtle phenomenon that infuses the body like dye in water.

Matter is *rupa* in Pali, which is the language that all the scriptures of the Theravāda tradition of Buddhism are written in. It is a dialect of one of the ancient languages in India. However, here *rupa*, matter, not only refers to the actual physical matter but to how the mind experiences this matter. And for the meditator this is very important.

The mind infuses the body and comes in contact with matter. This contact, this interface we can say, is the base of mind. It is the sense base. It is at five points that mind comes to know matter, the five sense bases. For example, light, as a physical phenomena, the photons, strikes the retina in the eye. This is all that is known by the eye. Without the retina, without the eyes, a person simply does not know or experience light. When the photons are felt by the mind at the point of contact on the retina, mind experiences matter. So it is with all the other senses of touch, smelling, hearing and tasting.

This initial contact with matter is experienced as a combination in varying degrees of what Buddhism calls four elements. They are descriptively known as earth, fire, water and air. The earth element refers to the quality of weight and is sensed as pressure, light or heavy. Fire is temperature from extreme heat to extreme cold. Water is cohesion or elasticity. It's what keeps things together. Air is movement, pure movement. The last two are difficult to experience purely by themselves, but can be done in meditation. The first two, pressure and temperature, are gross enough for us to be aware of even in daily life.

When someone stands on our toes in the bus queue, that's the earth element we are experiencing at base sense level. When we touch a hot pan handle by mistake, what makes us howl is the fire element at the sense base, the nerve endings in the hand. It is only after this is sensed that the mind recognises it as pressure or heat, and then, if mind perceives signals as too much, we react to avoid more of the pain.

If we just ponder for a moment, we come to realise that we don't actually know our bodies. For instance, we carefully comb our hair, we spend a lot of money at the barbers and hairdressers, but when one falls out, we never shed a tear, unless it becomes an epidemic, as it did with me. In fact, we don't have any

feeling in the hair, in the hair itself. It's not just my hair. What of nails? Of blood? Do we feel our blood? Even when we cut ourselves and some flows out, do I feel the blood in itself flow out of me? Do I experience me flowing out with my blood? When the blood falls and hits the floor, do I shout, "Ouch"?

In Buddhist understanding, the mind by which I know things is only in contact with the material body through the senses. So although the cut signals pain, I do not experience each skin cell nor the blood that flows. The point of contact is the nerve ending. If the nerve goes numb or is destroyed, I don't feel the cut. What I know of my body is what I can sense, that's all. I can see its shape, hear the heartbeat, feel pleasurable and painful sensations and so on. I experience this through the different interactions and combinations of the four elements. When we meditate, especially if we do a long course of, say, a week, these elements can become quite obvious to us. We begin to see that they form a category of mental experience.

The next category is the aggregate of sensations, called in Pali, *vedanā*. This is where we experience pleasurable, painful or neutral sensations. Whatever combinations of elements go to make up the original contact, this contact is experienced as pleasing, painful or neutral. When we chew an apple, a good juicy one, contacts are made all over the tongue. Each individual contact at the end of each taste bud on the tongue is experienced as sweet and tasty. All these sensations, and there's never a moment when the body is not sending sense data to the mind, can all be collected into one heap: the aggregate of sensation.

The third aggregate, *saññā*, is to do with that part of the mind that labels these sense objects. It includes all our perceptions. When air vibrations of a sound puts pressure on the eardrum, that pressure is mostly the earth element. This contact causes sensations to arise that are pleasant and that are then perceived as music. If the sensations are unpleasant, the sound is perceived as noise. If neither pleasant nor unpleasant, sound is perceived simply as sound. Included then in the aggregate is not just the labelling of things, but also our value judgements, including all our biases and prejudices.

The important thing for the meditator is to be able to listen to these perceptions objectively. And not only in the sitting posture, but throughout the day. If we heighten our general awareness, we come to know that many of our perceptions are subliminal. We are barely conscious of them. And we are often not conscious of how our perceptions are prejudiced. We take the way we think for granted. At base, then, this aggregate of perception, *saññā*, is just a recognition of the object, but this recognition has built-in values. It is these value judgments that can be wrong, and so bring about suffering for others and ourselves. We need to investigate all our value judgments. We need to become more and more aware of the aggregate of perception.

The next aggregate is called volitional formations or conditioning, *saṅkhāra*, and refers to all those states of mind, negative and positive. It is all our emotions and moods. It is in this aggregate that we can say we experience the sufferings and the joys of life. It is one of the aims of meditation to cleanse this aggregate of all the negative states and move towards those states of mind the Buddha called the divine abodes. That is,

abiding in loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

These volitional conditionings are that part of the mind that reacts to incoming data, sensations and perceptions. It is very important here for the meditator to grasp what is happening if such negativity is to be undermined. By negativity here, it simply meant all those states of mind that we experience as unpleasant, disagreeable and painful, like depression, anxiety, fear, frustration, guilt, sorrow, and so on.

Jack sits in the armchair with a cup of tea after a hard day's work, finally enjoying a bit of peace and quiet. Suddenly, through the dividing wall, heavy rock comes bursting through from next door. The insistent thud beats its rhythm on Jack's eardrum. Feelings arise perceived as unpleasant. This perception of noise sharpens the focus and the reaction arises. This reaction is how Jack has taught himself to respond to such a perception. He's fuming with anger, more so because he's asked his neighbours not to play their music aloud.

Now at first glance it seems that Jack is justified in his anger. That his anger is caused by next door who are not being neighbourly. But is his anger really caused by their lack of neighbourliness or by the heavy rock? Or is his anger the way he's taught himself to react when he hears such a noise? This is a crucial point, and once we've grasped the mechanics here and actually see what is happening within ourselves, we will be able to make great headway in reducing the amount of emotional suffering we bear. This is one of the reasons for meditation, to become more and more aware of our passing moods, how they arise and how they pass away.

This aggregate, translated as volitional formations or volitional conditionings, is precisely so called because these mental states are the product of our own will. Nobody has made Jack angry. Nothing at all, in fact, makes Jack angry. Jack's anger is his own learnt response, willed by him and him alone. When Jill, his teenage daughter, comes in looking for something, she quite unconsciously starts humming the tune, subliminally delighted by that very same noise that Jack, her dad, says ruins his tea.

Indeed, if anger were caused by an outside object, then we could argue that there must be an object in the world that makes everyone angry as soon as they see or hear it. But this is not so. We all have our own conditioning, and individual conditionings have their own individual reactions.

Now you might ask, well, how is it I get angry even when I don't mean to? If it is really all to do with me conditioning myself, if it is really all to do with my will, why don't I have immediate control? The fact is that will has conditioned this category of mind. Habits have been formed. That part of the mind which contains our emotional reactions and moods has been habituated, trained, conditioned to respond in certain ways. The first step to undermining this conditioning is to realize for ourselves the role of the will. Then we can see clearly that our emotions and moods are truly the result of past acts of will. We then realize that by refusing to will, to entertain these states of mind, they will pass away.

Jack believes he is right to get angry with his neighbours. He believes it is justified. In fact, he's tricked

himself into believing that the music and the neighbours themselves are directly causing his anger. So long as he believes this, every time anger arises because of the music and the neighbours, he will indulge that anger. When he indulges that anger, he is actually saying, "Yes, I will get angry." If only Jack would meditate. If he did, he would soon come to realize that it is he himself who wills his own anger. By refusing to will it, to indulge it, he will undermine his own learnt response. Eventually, he will come to perceive the noise as simply sound. He may even be influenced by his teenage daughter and come to recognize some musicality.

When a meditator who has always believed that others were the cause of her or his anger, depression, stress and so on, realize that they are in fact self-taught responses, a great insight has been made. For from now on, the state of mind will come more and more under personal control. She realizes that she can control it, given time and ardent practice. This practice is twofold. Firstly, not to indulge in any negative states of mind, thereby allowing old conditioning to die out. Secondly, not to will any new negative states of mind, thereby keeping the mind pure. This is a very liberating insight.

Finally, there is the aggregate of consciousness. This is the faculty in the mind that just cognizes, it knows, it is the mirror in which all the rest of the mind displays itself. This consciousness in meditation takes on the quality of awareness and objective viewing and knowing. From this standpoint of watching all the sensations, emotions, thoughts and imaginings, insight into the true nature of mind arises. This is the first step for the meditator, to become the impartial objective observer. Just knowing what's going on is enough for wisdom and insight to arise.

So, to recap. The Buddha divided the human being into five aggregates or heaps. They are, firstly, matter and mind's initial contact with matter through the six senses. The sixth sense here being mind itself. Secondly, all the sensations experienced as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Thirdly, all the perceptions, recognitions, images and thoughts. Fourthly, all the mental states, our moods and emotions. And lastly, all our consciousnesses that know all this. The importance of these categorizations is that they help us to pinpoint where suffering arises.

When I first walked around the streets in my robes, I was very much aware of people's reactions to this alien. One of the most difficult reactions for me to handle with equanimity was the look of disgust. Now, what actually happened to me on such an occasion? The retinas of my eyes simply respond to incoming light, that is, the simple contact. This light is conveyed to the mind where perception recognizes it. It is pigeonholed as woman with disgusted look at me, and with it, bad, meaning, no one should look at the noble likes of me with disgust.

With the perception of a disgusted face, there arises in me the feelings of what these perceptions mean. I feel her disgust for me. I empathize. Unpleasant feelings fill my body, so this is what she feels for me. I now get angry because I believe that if someone is disgusted with me for no logical reason, from my point of view that is, I am justified in getting angry with that person. Who is she to feel disgust at me? Doesn't

she know I'm a monk? How ignorant! It's disgusting. This disgust and the ensuing anger is simply how I've trained myself to respond to such looks. My consciousness totally identifies with this. This is the me, the ego. Anything can happen. Next morning, the headlines read, "Buddhist monk breaks begging bowl on old woman's head. It's disgusting."

Of course, it is hoped that the monk has learned his lesson, and that now realizing that the woman did not actually make him disgusted and angry, he understands that the woman's perception and feelings are her own too.

That in truth, the more skillful response may have been a smile.

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

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