

The Ultimate Guide to a Better Life



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Deep Dharma's Commentary

For Vasubandhu's *Discussion of the Five Aggregates*

Introduction

Vasubandhu's *Discussion of the Five Aggregates* is a very detailed analysis of the aggregates (which are described below), explaining each aggregate and its implications in profound, analytic, elementally defining depth. This is a master meditator and philosopher sharing all his insights into one of the most foundational and important of all Buddhist concepts.

Overall, the concept of the aggregates is how we explain the arising of a “psycho-physical Self,” of an individual personality, but here Vasubandhu is only concerned with explaining the content of each aggregate, and not its operation as a schema for the arising of Self. In addition, we should note that Vasubandhu is developing the understanding of The Five Aggregates by adding elements, such as the *manas* consciousness [see Appendix], of his Yogacara philosophy to it.

As Stephen Anacker says in the introduction to his translation of Vasubandhu's *Discussion of the Five Aggregates* (the translation on which this commentary is based):

This work is an analysis of those aggregations of events that constitute a living organism. The method for describing “personality” as aggregates of events of five different basic types goes back to the Buddha himself. According to this analysis, what is called an “individual” or “personality” is a complex array of always changing interdependent events. The analysis (and the meditation in which it is rooted) focuses on complex successions of aggregates of particular momentary* phenomena, and, while treating them genetically, refuses to comprise them into hypothetical wholes. That is, an “individual” is really all the changing states “which make him up,” and there is no central entity underlying the organism. It is only the close interdependence of aggregation of moment-events which make up for their relationship.

**The doctrine of momentariness, the belief that phenomena ultimately can be reduced to discreet moments, to a succession of discrete momentary entities, was extensively debated in Buddhist philosophy for five centuries before Vasubandhu and for another three centuries after his death. Simply put, the doctrine of momentariness asserted that everything passes out of existence as soon as it has originated and in this sense is momentary. As an entity vanishes, it gives rise to a new entity of almost the same nature which originates immediately afterwards. This means there is an uninterrupted flow of causally connected momentary entities of nearly the same nature which form a contiguity that is a convenient way of explaining memory and continuity of personality. Extensive arguments abounded, both for and against the doctrine of momentariness, which seems to suggest a permanence to “discreet moments”—but without any final resolution or even a consensus. Vasubandhu himself seems to vacillate—sometimes appearing to believe in the doctrine, other times appearing to reject it, but in the end just to be using it as an explanatory schema or analogy. Today, we might say, using tech-world jargon, the aggregates are “tightly coupled” and simply stop there.*

Before diving directly into the *Discussion*, as background, let's look at how the aggregates are generally understood and taught today in modern Buddhism, or "philosophical Buddhism" (meaning Buddhist practice that is focused on the doctrine and personal practice, without focus on particular cultural content that has crept in in the Asian countries that are the historical home of Buddhist cultures). We should also note that Vasubandhu is assuming that his readers have this level, and perhaps a bit deeper level, of familiarity with this ancient doctrine.

The aggregates (bolded below) are an ancient, five-step model for how we create our understanding of ourselves and the world:

When we make a **(1) a sense contact** (often this first aggregate is labeled "**form**," for Vasubandhu it is best understood as "**materiality**"), we cling to our **(2) feeling** about that contact—our affinity or aversion for it. If the contact and its attendant feeling are strong enough, **(3) cognition** (commonly today this second aggregate is translated a "**perception**") arises—we cognize and apprehend it, meaning we label it, filter it in, and set our brain to writing a story about it. The stories, called **(4) volitional formations**, are fabricated from memory fragments assembled because they somehow seem close to what's happening, and because they seem to make sense in terms of our previous understandings and beliefs about similar things. "Motivational Dispositions" is Vasubandhu's translation for this fourth aggregate. The mind then sends the story to our **(5) consciousness** and we assert it is who we are and what we believe, and then act from that position. So the story is written without our knowledge from fragments of older stories, each similarly written from fragments of older stories, all based on affinities or aversions that arose, not from the present moment, not from the present situation, but from previous primitive responses to a sense input. Note that this process happens very rapidly, and, unless skillfully observed, typically automatically and without our noticing – it is the default way that we perceive the world.

The consequence of all this is "stories," really fictional perceptions and narrative, and while they may be helpful to us in navigating ourselves and our world, they are certainly not an accurate understanding of what is and what is happening. But we believe these concocted mental constructs, we protect and defend them as true and right, which makes anyone who disagrees with us appear to be foolish and wrong, and apart from us (outside our "Self"). Worse, we act on them with certainty, which leads to everything from unnecessary minor disagreements with our family members to open hostility with others, whether in the form of political arguments around the family dinner table or at its most extreme, war and genocide.

Further, it is important to note that the way we process information is to reify things. By that we mean that our mind makes things seen independent, accurate, true, and real in the way we are perceiving them, by concocting stories in this five-step process. This arising of a story starts with a sense contact, then with the assignment of a feeling tone—affinity or aversion—to it, next through apprehending it by creating a narrative to understand it, and finally by sending the narrative to our conscious mind where it appears as "I am the kind of person who: *whatever-the-story-is*." This falsely reifies things, making them appear as concrete, separate and permanent. We know better. We know that nothing is concrete, separate and permanent. People often say, "That's just the way I am," or "It is what it is." Nonsense, as Vasubandhu asserts in this

Discussion. These stories are just mental self-centered mental constructs—they are not permanent nor true in the way they seem.

Strictly speaking, if anything were permanent, were possessed of intrinsic unchanging characteristics, the time and space it occupies would have to be permanent. That means the planet would have to stop spinning, the universe stop expanding, and so on as there would be no change possible to these “things” that were made up of certain characteristics. We know better, and even with our limited aggregate-based perception, we sense change all around us, all the time. We just don’t believe it, mostly because the way we concoct stories, it makes everything appear as absolutely true, in addition to solid, separate, autonomous, and therefore unchanging. (Natural selection has not been a good friend to us in this respect. Our minds have developed to present seemingly useful, but never accurate information about ourselves and our world. So without intellectual scrutiny, we are always in a state of delusion.)

The stories our mind presents to us are not permanent, they are “empty”—meaning empty of permanence, empty of unchanging intrinsically real characteristics. We know this because everything arises in dependence on other things, and if anything were permanent it could not, by definition, arise in dependence on other things.¹ In order for something to be separate and independent, it could not depend on anything else for its existence. Our stories, while practical and useful in that they allow us to navigate the everyday world, are really just fictions, ultimately false, ultimately mistaken views—not to be taken seriously, certainly not to be clung to.

Vasubandhu starts the *Discussion* by naming the five aggregates (using Anacker’s translation from the *Discussion*) as (1) materialities, (2) feelings, (3) cognitions, (4) motivational dispositions, and (5) consciousnesses. The text is then divided into five sections, numbered 1 through 5, in which each aggregate is discussed. The discussion, after some initial definitions, largely hinges on presenting each aggregate in terms of its beneficial aspects, unbeneficial aspects, and indeterminant aspects; meaning thoughts that are causing more suffering, thoughts that are decreasing suffering, and those that are indeterminant, that are sometimes a source of suffering and sometimes not.

One – Materiality

The Four Great Elements

For Vasubandhu, the first aggregate is whatever has dimensionality, form, and consists of the four great elements. By dimensionality or form, Vasubandhu means that something has spatial extent—it has length, width and height. By the four great elements, Vasubandhu means earth, water, fire, and air. In traditional Buddhism the four elements are viewed as categories of sensory experience, today they are often taught as metaphors. The elements are not meant as literal components, but rather as a schema for understanding the material world by dividing it into these four simple categories: earth representing solidity, water representing liquidity or flowing, fire representing heat, and wind or air representing wind or gaseousness.

¹ For a complete discussion of dependence and dependent arising, see our commentary on Nagarjuna’s *Middle Way Philosophy* elsewhere on DeepDharma.

This was a common, everyday model in India at the time of the Buddha and so it is not surprising that it is the opening sentence of the *Discussion*, or that its structure and function is assumed to be ready knowledge for its readers. At the time Vasubandhu wrote, the four elements were used to teach Buddhist adherents non-attachment (after all, if all material things are composed of four parts—the elements—then this teaches us that there is nothing solid and permanent to attach to, not even Self). Without attaching, Vasubandhu is declaring, the pathway to liberation is right in front of us.

It is worth noting that the concept of the four elements (sometimes there are five, sometimes six) are still in everyday currency in Asian cultures. They are deeply woven into the fabric of traditional aspects of Indian and Chinese culture. The theory of the elements, for example, are foundational concepts for traditional Indian and Chinese medicine, Taoism, and other Chinese disciplines like *feng shui*, the martial arts, and the *I Ching*.

In the traditional literary and scriptural style of his time, Vasubandhu defines the four elements in a question-and-answer format: “What is the earth element? It is solidity. What is the water element? It is liquidity,” and so on. This Q&A style, which originated in the 4th century BCE in Vasubandhu’s intellectual tradition was stark, and seems bare and undeveloped to us today, in how it isolated, listed and defined concepts, often in terms of themselves, which had been experienced in meditation and developed through intellectual scrutiny and discussion.

Derived from the Elements: Sense Organs and their Objects of Contact

In the same paragraph, immediately after listing and defining the elements, Vasubandhu asks: “What is derived from them [the elements]?” And we are off and running: listing and defining the sensory constituents of this first aggregate, Q&A style; listing the objects with which they make contact: the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, and the body, and for each of these an object—visibles, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile experiences. Vasubandhu concluded this listing with “unmanifest action,”* the result of mind contact—an understanding not usually taught today.

Let’s explore this addition more fully. Manifest action is action that arises outside the actor and is capable of being observed by others. There are, in traditional Buddhism, three kinds of actions: those produced from body, from speech, and from mind—actions, talk, and thoughts. But mind activity (thoughts) is considered “unmanifest” activity, meaning that, like the other activities, it results from materiality as sensory contact, but does not get expressed externally (manifested) until the right conditions arise to manifest it. When these unmanifest activities come to fruition they become manifest actions and they exert a karmic effect on the agent according to the nature of the unmanifest action. In other words, the effect of the imprints, or seeds, in the alaya consciousness, the storehouse consciousness, will reflect the “wholesome” or “unwholesome” nature of the stored (unmanifest) imprint.

In Vasubandhu’s great four volume philosophic work, the *Abhidharmakosabhasya*, he writes that this is complicated (no joke!), “[a]s soon as one performs an action [with our physical form, our materiality] we create a set of unmanifest karma (karmic imprints) which then generates another

karmic set in the next moment, and so on, and this karma (unmanifest action) is stored up for later . . .” In other words, everything we do with body, speech, or mind, leaves an imprint which acts as a blueprint for future behavior.

This addition of unmanifest activity and its consequent karma to the first aggregate is a unique addition of Vasubandhu to understanding this first aggregate, and the aggregates in general, and to understanding the nature and origin of karma from classical and traditional interpretations of this concept. This is the Yogacara school overlay that Vasubandhu is adding.

Today, we would just say; eye and visible or material forms we see; ear and sounds we hear; nose and aromas we smell; throat or tongue and foods we taste; body and things we feel; and mind and thoughts we think. But Vasubandhu writes:

What is the sense organ of the eye?	It is sentient materiality which has color as its sense-object.
What is the sense organ of the ear?	It is sentient materiality which has sounds as its sense-object.
What is the sense organ of the nose.	It is sentient materiality which has smells as its sense-object.
What is the sense organ of the tongue?	It is sentient materiality which has taste as its sense-object.
What is the sense organ of the body?	It is sentient materiality which has tactile sensations as its sense-object.

So, not so different from the colloquial understanding recited above the table, though the use of the phrase “sentient materiality,” meaning that “form” is of an apprehensive, self-aware being, a human, is unique to Vasubandhu in this context.

Vasubandhu then shifts, without explanation and without mentioning the sixth sense, mind and thought, which will be discussed later in the text, to the objects of sensory perceptions, adding considerable detail to his analysis and including mention of manifest and unmanifest action as part of the sense-objects (karma, as Vasubandhu is saying, is a part of each sense perception at the “moment” of contact):

And what are visibles?	They are the sense-objects of the eye: color, configuration, and manifest action.
And what are sounds?	They are the sense-objects of the ear, having as their causes great elements, elements appropriated by the body, or great elements unappropriated.
And what are smells?	They are the sense-objects of the nose: pleasant smells, unpleasant smells, and those which are neither.
And what are tastes?	They are the sense-objects of the tongue: sweet, sour, salty, sharp, bitter, and astringent.

What is everything that can be subsumed under tactile sensations?	They are the sense objects of the body: the great elements themselves, softness, hardness, heaviness, lightness, coldness, hunger, and thirst.
What is unmanifest actions?	It is materiality which has arisen from manifest action or meditational concentration: it is invisible and exercises no resistance.

Vasubandhu brings this first section abruptly to an end here, as though there were no close interdependence, no schematic relationship between the first and second aggregates. Again, as we mentioned earlier in this commentary, he is presenting them, in the ancient Abhidharma-style, as a list of five terms that need defining, and not as any kind of “whole.” Any connection between the aggregates, any transitions between one and two or two and three, and so on, are from the authors of this commentary, not Vasubandhu, even though he does see them, as Anacker points out, as complex successions of five closely interdependent aggregates.

Two – Feelings

Feelings, the second aggregate, are affective tones that occur at the “moment” of contact from a stimulus. These are broad, meta-emotional responses to a sense contact, in that they are either simple affinities or aversions that form pre-consciously, with varying degrees of intensity added to the contact. There are three kinds of affective experiences according to Vasubandhu: pleasant (events for which we have affinities), unpleasant (events for which we have aversions), and events which are neither pleasant nor unpleasant:

1. Pleasant is defined as whatever we have an affinity for, whatever we desire more of once it has stopped, whatever we want again once it is gone.
2. Unpleasant is defined as whatever we have an aversion toward, whatever we wish to become separated from or avoid once it has arisen.
3. That which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant is defined as anything toward which neither an affinity nor an aversion has arisen when contact with it is made; this is not neutral, but a non-valuing.

While Vasubandhu is only interested here in this *Discussion* with labeling and defining the primitive feelings that arise on contact with sense objects, external (eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body) or internal (mind), it is worth a brief exploration from a modern Westerner’s understanding, from the perspectives of anthropologists and neuroscientists, so we can see how feelings flow from contact.

Some anthropologists explain this second aggregate in terms of natural selection, in terms of survival and reproduction. From a natural selection perspective, it is essential that we know

whether something is “pleasant,” meaning good and desirable and approachable, or “unpleasant,” meaning bad, threatening, undesirable and to be avoided. And we need to know this immediately upon encountering it, free of the time and complication involved with analysis or other complex cognizing of the experience in our higher reasoning (frontal lobe) centers. Our survival depends on our ability to differentiate friends from enemies, threatening sounds like growls from beneficial sounds like an infant laughing. The line of anthropological reasoning explains that, because the environment can only support so many individuals, some individuals will be more successful at finding food, recognizing friends, or avoiding predators, and will therefore have a better chance to survive, thrive, and reproduce. Those who react quickly to aversive things in the environment are likely to do better, at least from a survival perspective, so knowing immediately whether something is desirable or aversive is essential to our longevity. Thus these three feeling tones.

Neuroscientists can now show that these reactions to sense stimuli come from the oldest, most primitive parts of our brain: the brain stem or amygdala, colloquially termed the “lizard brain.” The lizard brain is responsible for primitive survival reactions, like fight (aggression) or flight (avoidance), or pleasure or displeasure in response to a sense contact. These primitive responses are meant to give us an edge by making us stressed or anxious or afraid or worried at things which are deemed aversive at the point of contact, or by making us happy with those things for which we have affinities, for which we have a pleasant feeling tone arise.

Three – Cognition

For Vasubandhu, cognition takes place through consciousness, meaning that everything we know is acquired through sensory contact, through our sense consciousnesses.² Keeping in mind that Vasubandhu (as with all Buddhist thinkers of his and later eras) considers mind and thought, mental impressions, as part of the sense consciousness along with the more commonly understood senses like sight, hearing and touch. Importantly, this means that the appearance of cognitive objects does not require an actual external object for consciousness to cognize it—seeing or hearing a ghost (really, to be precise, having a mental impression of a ghost, not “seeing” or “hearing”), for example.

This third aggregate involves “grasping of signs in a sense-object,” implications that we are perceiving from the sense-object, and then the labeling of that contact so that we can create a story, a narrative about it in the fourth aggregate.

There are, Vasubandhu writes, three kinds of cognitions:

² This position is strongly reminiscent (presages really) modern Western empiricist philosophers such as David Hume who also, without apparent knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, pointed out that all knowledge is ultimately founded on sense perceptions.

1. Indefinite, or
2. Definite, or
3. Immeasurable

Vasubandhu provides “space” and “ocean” as examples of immeasurable cognitions; no examples are given for indefinite or definite cognitions, but “indefinite,” for example, could be a general concept like housing, and “definite,” a house. Understanding this gives us a further appreciation for the emptiness of cognitions, which when practiced with, lessens grasping and attachment to our narratives created in aggregate four.

Four – Motivational Dispositions

This fourth aggregate, “motivational dispositions,” is made up of the stories, the narratives, we create from the label or signs implied in the third aggregate. These narratives are motivational dispositions, interpretations that motivate us to understand and behave in particular ways that have arisen from our karma (the accumulation of our past intentional acts and impressions).

Vasubandhu allots more than half of the text of the *Discussion* to this fourth aggregate, mostly in creating list after list genetically explaining “cittas,” after first saying that motivation dispositions are “events associated with cittas.” Clearly, to make sense of Vasubandhu’s goal in breaking down cittas in extensive detail, we need to understand the word “citta,” which is not easy to translate or define, as Anacker points out in the introduction to his translation of the *Discussion*.

Citta is sometimes translated as “thought,” but we generally think of a “thought” as purely discursive, whereas citta is broader and includes an affective component—an emotional or motivating component. Citta is also sometimes translated as “mind,” meaning “mind” in general, or mental processes as a whole, or as heart/mind, emphasizing it as more the affective side of mind than the discursive.

Anacker defines “citta” as “the basic consciousness-moment.” What we generally understand by citta today are streams of those moments with their preceding mental applications and their subsequent discursive thought. In Anacker’s words: “when meditation manuals speak of ‘watching the flow of cittas,’ they mean something much more fundamental than witnessing an internal discursiveness: they are talking about unattached observation of consciousness-moments.”

Vasubandhu opens his discussion of this fourth aggregate by asking, “And what are motivational dispositions? They are events associated with cittas.” Vasubandhu next lists what he apparently thinks is the definitive categorization of all sixty-four types of events, explains the categories, and then defines them individually, excluding feelings and cognitions, which have already been explained.

At first, Vasubandhu’s preoccupation with breaking down motivational dispositions into the categories can seem a little baffling, or even pointless. However, if the reader can engage with the categories, consider them with focus and discernment, it becomes clearer that Vasubandhu may be presenting lists that comprise a complete “mind map” that could lead us to understand our thoughts most fully, and thus act as a critical tool to help us end our suffering.

Vasubandhu's Categories of Motivational Dispositions

To make Vasubandhu's multifarious categories of motivational dispositions more accessible, we are combining the listed events together with their definitions (Vasubandhu has them in separate paragraphs), and adding explanatory comments (which are differentiated from the text by their rust color), under their appropriate categories. Note that the definitions take the traditional Q&A structure of the ancient Abhidharma, which mean events are sometimes defined in terms of themselves. Also, they are presented here as written to give you a flavor of the text, and in the sequence of the text. Only in the first grouping, *five events associated with every citta*, do they arise in sequence as numbered here; in all the other groupings, they are numbered for convenience and the numbers are not meant to imply a sequence from one to the next.

Again, Vasubandhu's text is in black, our commentarial notes follow it in the rust colored text.

The five events associated with every citta:

1. *Contact* – And what is contact? It is the distinguishing which comes after the three (sense organ, object of sense, and corresponding consciousness) have met together. **This is the threefold nature of a sense contact, which has three aspects that arise in this order: sense object (mental impression, sight, sound, etc.) makes contact with sense organ (eye, ear, etc.) and arises in sense consciousness.**
2. *Attention* – And what is mental attention? It is the entering into done by a citta. **This is an attending to, a focus upon, that which arises from contact.**
3. *Feelings* – See above: Feelings.
4. *Cognitions* – See above: Cognitions.
5. *Volitions* – What is volition? It is mental action which impels a citta toward good qualities, flaws, and that which is neither. **These are intentions used to establish the cognitions, and which lead the citta, the mind-event, to be either wholesome or unwholesome (or to neither, which is a mental state without externally stimulated affect, and which Vasubandhu does not explain in the *Discussion*).**

The five events associated with some specific sense-objects:

1. *Zest* – And what is zest? It is desire toward a range of events of which there is consciousness. **This is an enthusiasm for the dharma that arises from meditation and practice.**
2. *Confidence* – And what is confidence? It is holding to certainty in regard to a range of events of which there is certainty. **This is a firm understanding that the dharma has given us the tools to handle any situation.**
3. *Memory or Mindfulness* – What is memory? It is the non-forgetting of a range of events toward which there is acquaintance, and is a certain kind of discourse of citta. **This can be understood as an internal self-talk that keeps us present with a range of arising events, recognizing and processing them; it encourages the development of mindfulness and wisdom.**
4. *Meditational Concentration* – What is meditational concentration? It is one-pointedness of citta towards an examined range of events. **Vasubandhu is suggesting that meditative**

concentration, being able to focus on the object of meditation without distraction, is an important part of our practice, and arises from certain specific meditational objects, like the breath.

5. *Insight* – What is insight? It is discernment as regards the same, and is either understanding, that which has arisen from not having understood, or that which is different from these two. *Insight is the understanding of emptiness that arises from single-pointedness in meditation or the concentrated state that arises from prolonged uninterrupted focus.*

The eleven beneficial events associated with citta:

These are aspects of consciousness that apprehend the quality of an object; they are qualities that color our perception. There is considerable meat to chew on here; don't stop with a simple superficial understanding of these eleven; dig in—this is a practice for years, not says or weeks or months. Also, note that beneficial events are sometimes a lack of something rather than a presence of something, which on first sight seems counterintuitive. Carl has found that deeply studying the subtleties and practicing with these eleven has weakened his manas, his Self.

1. *Faith* – What is faith? It is firm conviction, desire, and serenity of citta towards action, its results, the beneficial, and the Gems [the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha]. *This is confidence (not unquestioned or blind faith – which is firmly believed without relying on logic or material evidence); confidence from one's personal experience that the teachings and meditative practice work in lessening our angst and suffering.*
2. *Inner Shame* – What is inner shame? It is a shame coming about through a committed offense, in which the self, or rather the (psychological) event responsible, is predominant. *Shame arises when we know we have done something unwholesome, something unproductive toward understanding citta or lessening attachment. For Vasubandhu, it is a beneficial self-talk event because it leads us to understand our behavior in a way that makes us more and more able to be wholesome in our actions. This is a counterintuitive understanding of shame; in the West today, shame is commonly seen as a strong negative mindstate, and emphatically not as beneficial.*
3. *Dread of Blame* – And what is dread of blame? It is the shame towards others that comes about through a committed offense in which the outer world is predominant. *This is the discomfort or fear of being blamed by others for our unwholesome actions. Like inner shame, it is a beneficial self-talk event because it leads us to understand our behavior in a way that makes us more and more able to be wholesome in our actions.*
4. *The Root of the Beneficial of Lack of Greed* – What is lack of greed? It is the antidote to greed, a non-attachment to that which is arising in *manas*. [*Manas* is the defiled mental consciousness, the seventh consciousness of the eight consciousnesses in Vasubandhu's Yogacara model. See Appendix] *This is (1) the not-attaching to our assignment of desire for more of those things with a positive feeling, and (2) less of those with a negative feeling. Both here a counterintuitive.*
5. *The Root of the Beneficial of Lack of Hostility* – What is lack of hostility? It is the antidote to hostility, and is loving kindness. *Patience, which is an inner state of mind, is usually described as the antidote to anger (hostility), but here Vasubandhu says that acting from a mind state of loving kindness is the antidote. Patience can mitigate anger because it is a non-hostile presence in the moment that leads us to loving kindness.*

6. *The Root of the Beneficial of Lack of Confusion* – What is lack of confusion? It is the antidote to confusion, and is right recognition. This is seeing things clearly—as empty. It is the lack of confusion that arises from wisdom.
7. *Vigor* – And what is vigor? It is the antidote to sloth, and is enthusiasm of *citta* towards the beneficial. This is a physical and mental energy that is propelled by a feeling of enthusiasm for the beneficial. It can be, as one of its characteristics, an extension of Zest (see above).
8. *Tranquility* – And what is tranquility? It is the antidote to a situation of susceptibility to harm, and is a skill in bodily and mental action. Tranquility, an inner calm, when practiced deeply, protects us from the arising of harmful, angry and delusion-based events. This is what keeps us calm when it seems a storm has arisen.
9. *Carefulness* – And what is carefulness? It is the antidote to carelessness, a cultivation of those beneficial events through continuing in those beneficial factors: lack of greed, lack of hostility, lack of confusion, and tranquility. Carefulness is a mindful approach to our everyday lives that leaves us avoiding greed, anger, and delusion-based thoughts and actions, and that encourages the arising of the inner calm of tranquility.
10. *Equanimity* – What is equanimity? It is whatever evenness of *citta*, remaining in a tranquil state of *citta*, total tranquility in *citta* continuing in those factors: lack of greed, lack of hostility, lack of confusion, and tranquility, through which there is continuity in a state without afflictions through the clearing away of afflicted events. Equanimity (and there are various degrees of equanimity; it is not an all or nothing mind event) arises when we have lessened or cleared greed, anger, and delusion from our minds. It is then that a state of evenness and calm, of peacefulness and comfortableness, of ease, arises in our response to events; it is not a flatlining or total impassivity with no affect.
11. *Attitude of Non-Harming* – And what is an attitude of non-harming? It is the antidote to an attitude of harming, and is compassion. This is a state of mind disposing us toward compassion, or more broadly: patience, compassion, and generosity, the antidotes to the “three poisons” (delusion/confusion, greed/attachment, aversion/ill will).

The six primary afflictive events associated with *cittas*:

1. *Attachment* – And what is attachment? It is adherence to any fixed intent in appropriating aggregates [“appropriating aggregates” are those in a particular sequence]. Attachment is a strong bonding with the aggregates leading to a false and ignorant belief that the stories, the *sankharas*, that arise in the fourth aggregate, as motivational dispositions, are true and wise as perceived when in fact they are false and foolish.
2. *Aversion* – And what is aversion? It is a tormented volition toward sentient beings. Aversion is the intention to avoid a person, place, thing (or any sense object) because it is associated with or deemed to be unpleasant or painful. Also, it is the anger that arises from being in contact with something or someone deemed as an unpleasant or painful stimulus.
3. *Pride* – And what is pride? There are seven kinds of pride:
 - (1) Basic Pride: Basic pride is any inflation of *citta* which considers, through a smallness, either “I am greater,” or “I am equal.”
 - (2) Greater Pride: Greater pride is any inflation of *citta* which considers, through an equality, that “I am greater,” or “I am endowed with greatness.”
 - (3) Pride that is More than Pride: Pride that is more than pride is an inflation of *citta* which considers, through a greatness, that “I am great.”

- (4) Pride of thinking “I am”: Pride of thinking “I am” is any inflation of *citta* that is connected with the view of either “I am” or “mine” in regard to appropriating aggregates.
- (5) Conceit: Conceit is any inflation of *citta* which considers, in regard to an excellence which was previously obtained in another moment, but is no longer, “I’ve attained it.”
- (6) Pride of Thinking Deficiency: Pride of thinking deficiency is an inflation of *citta* which considers, “I am only a little bit inferior to those of greatly excellent qualities.”
- (7) False pride. False pride is an inflation of *citta* which considers, “I am endowed with good qualities” when good qualities have not been acquired.

Pride is an inordinately strong sense of self, an unreasonable conceit about one’s superiority or inferiority which manifests itself in a sense of loftiness or haughtiness and that often leads to contempt of others, again because they are deemed *by me, the judge*, as problematically superior or inferior *to me, the judge*, the center of all stories, all narratives, all motivational dispositions (the fourth aggregate). Pride is often a much more insidious presence than it may seem; it can be so entwined with the sense of self that it is not readily detectable by the prideful one, especially the subtler forms of Pride such as Pride of Thinking Deficiency or False Pride. Awareness of our pride, in all of its seven forms, practicing with pride in our everyday interactions, can lead us naturally to replacing pride with humility and modesty, the antidotes to pride and a significant source for weakening Self .

4. *Ignorance* – And what is ignorance? It is a lack of knowledge regarding action, results of action, the [Four Noble] Truths and the Gems, and also the mentally constructed that rises together with it. *Vasubandhu then adds this comment:* In the realm of desires there are three roots-of-the-unbeneficial: attachment, aversion, and ignorance, and these are the same as the [three additional] roots-of-the-unbeneficial: greed, hostility, and confusion. Ignorance, to Vasubandhu in this context, is not understanding karma and right action, the wisdom found in the Four Noble Truths, and not realizing the value of the teachings, the Buddhas and teachers who exemplify the teachings, and the sangha, those who protect and preserve the dharma for us (the Gems).
5. *Views* – And what are views? These views are generally of five kinds:
- (1) The view of a fixed [permanent] self in the body: The view of a fixed self in the body is an afflicted judgment viewing either an “I” or “mine” in appropriating aggregates. Vasubandhu is saying here, straight out, there is no soul, no atman, no permanent aspect, no inherent, autonomous self to be found in the five aggregates, together or individually; and if it isn’t there, it can’t be anywhere. To think otherwise gives rise to all the other afflictive events.
- (2) Views regarding the permanence or impermanence of the elements [aggregates] constituting personality: Views regarding the permanence or the impermanence of the elements constituting personality are the appropriating aggregates, and are afflicted judgments viewing them as either lasting or discontinuous. Vasubandhu is suggesting that all extreme views, such as the belief that things are either eternal/permanent or discontinuous/non-existent, are unequivocally *untrue* and are a significant source of suffering that is to be avoided. This emphasizes that existence is a constant flow of connected events that are dependent upon each other to arise and cease.
- (3) False views: False views are any afflicted judgments which involve fear toward the elements of existence, and which cast aspersions on the efficacy of cause-and-effect. False views are any view—any notion, idea, attitude, belief, value, posture, orientation, etc.—any idea of there being a permanent self, a soul; any notion that there is permanence at the

core of everything, any idea that we should stubbornly adhere to our understandings as true and accurate, and any notion that following prescribed religious rites and rituals can end our suffering.

Vasubandhu notably mentions here that it is a False View to “cast aspersions on the efficacy of cause and effect” which may be a source of confusion for a modern reader. He spends considerable time and energy explaining that it is an afflictive view to think that any phenomenon or object has any permanent characteristics, so how can there be cause and effect if there are no real individuated objects/phenomena to embody causes and effects? The resolution of this apparent conflict is that by “cause and effect” Vasubandhu is using a shorthand reference to the dependent nature of all apparent phenomena. As explained in the idea of the Two Truths, the “middle way” between reification (there are actual objects as we perceive them) and nihilism (there is simply nothing at all), is to see that all apparent phenomena arise in dependence on other “preceding” phenomena, which themselves arose in dependence upon preceding phenomena, in an infinite regression/progression. Nothing has intrinsic, independent characteristics, necessitating that these phenomena arise in dependence upon other phenomena (e.g., put somewhat misleadingly by Vasubandhu as being “effectuated” by the principle of “cause and effect”).

(4) Adherence to particular views: Adherence to particular views is an afflicted judgment viewing these same three views [(1) the view of a fixed self in the body, (2) views regarding the permanence or impermanence of the elements constituting personality, and (3) false views], and the aggregates which continue in them, as being the best, the most excellent, attained, and most exalted. This is “hanging in there” or clinging mightily to our notions of Self, regardless of the knowledge that they are false and foolish.

(5) Adherence to mere rule and ritual: Attachment to mere rules and rituals is an afflicted judgment seeing in rules and rituals, and in the aggregates continuing in them, purity, liberation, and a leading to nirvana. Simply adhering to rites and rituals: praying and giving gifts to statues, paying priests to slaughter animals, showing up for religious services a prescribed number of times to ensure one’s future liberation—no rite, no ritual, no sacrifice can cause us to end our suffering, in and of itself. Rules and rituals may be helpful if they allow us space and perspective to gain greater understanding of no-Self and dependent arising, but if they do not help in this way (e.g., by encouraging attachment to the rules/rituals in themselves), they may also be counterproductive.

6. *Doubt*— And what is doubt? It is any two-mindedness as regards the Truths, etc., and false views, adherence to particular views, and adherence to mere rule and ritual. The view of a fixed self in the body, views regarding the permanence or impermanence of the aggregates constituting personality, often arise together with false views, adherence to particular views, and adherence to mere rite and ritual. Doubt is to be undecided or skeptical with regards to what is right view. In particular, Vasubandhu here defines wrong view as views of a permanent self, extreme views, false views, and adherence to mere rites and rituals. Doubt is seen as wholly negative in this perspective.

The twenty secondary afflictive events associated with citta:

Much is written about anger in the Buddhist literature, but Vasubandhu adds hostility and maliciousness to the list of afflictions, defining each of them with more specificity than is generally used in everyday writing and speech today. This is a subtle but useful refining; anger is a generalized feeling of displeasure, distress, or provocation (we get angry at “bad” weather, or a building whose design we don’t like, for example), anger lacks an intent to do harm to the source of the anger; hostility is animosity or anger with a deliberate intention to do harm, hostility is a disposition that arises from a desire to harm (hostilities toward immigrants led to demonization and mass deportation); maliciousness is the extreme of hostility, it is a spiteful need to see others suffer, it is getting pleasure from making others suffer (malicious feelings toward the newspaper or an article it had publishes about him led the gunman to blast his way into the newspaper offices and murder five journalists at the Annapolis Capital Gazette). For Vasubandhu, these arrange from weakest to strongest in this way: anger, hostility, malice or maliciousness.

1. *Anger* – What is anger? It is any tormented volition of citta which all of a sudden becomes intent on doing harm. This is an intentional thought, or sometimes bigger, a full-blown mental formation, that is generated by a strong feeling of displeasure, hostility, or antagonism towards someone or something, excited by a real or supposed injury or insult to one’s self, combined with an urge to harm.
2. *Malice* – What is malice. It is taking hold of hostility. Malice is a strong attachment to the desire to harm others or make them suffer because of an anger-motivated disposition toward them.
3. *Hypocrisy* – What is hypocrisy? It is unwillingness to recognize one’s own faults. Hypocrisy is a feigning of qualities one does not possess; professing beliefs, feelings, or virtues that one does not hold or possess; a deliberately false presentation of self.
4. *Maliciousness* – What is maliciousness? It is being enslaved by unpleasant speech. Maliciousness here, in the sense that Vasubandhu is proposing, is a disposition to speak in ways that cause suffering (wrong speech). Note the orientation of this category toward speech, as opposed to the everyday notion that maliciousness is an internal feeling (more like Malice above).
5. *Envy* – What is envy? It is the agitation of citta at the attainments of another. Envy is an uneasiness or resentment aroused in us because we have a desire for the possessions or attributes of another. (This is not jealousy, which is a resentment toward another who desires what we have.)
6. *Selfishness* – What is selfishness? It is the holding fast to a citta which is not in accord with giving. Selfishness is attaching to one’s own self-serving narratives and desires, one’s own interests, at the expense of and instead of the needs and happiness of others.
7. *Deceitfulness* – What is deceitfulness? It is attempting to show forth to another an unreal object through an action of decoying. Deceitfulness is acting in ways that cause others to believe what is not true; it is deliberately giving a false impression.
8. *Guile* – What is guile? It is a deceitfulness of citta which seizes an opportunity for making secret one’s own flaws. Guile is astutely and cunningly deceiving another about one’s flaws and limitations.
9. *Mischievousness* – What is mischievous exuberance? It is holding fast to a delighted citta unconnected with internal good qualities. Mischievousness is enjoying and taking satisfaction in being vexing, annoying, roguish, or hurtful.

10. *Desire to harm* – What is an attitude of harming? It is an intention not to be beneficial towards sentient beings. This is having a nature of mean-spiritedness. More broadly, Vasubhandu can be read here to observe that a passive attitude (intention) not to be of help to others is actually a Desire to Harm.
11. *Lack of shame* – What is lack of shame? It is a lack of internal shame at offenses one has committed. A good example here of a seemingly circular definition (shame is defined in terms of itself), but Vasubhandu here intends to highlight the internal (as opposed to externally-focused) feeling of shame. Shame is a lack of remorse at actions that are blameworthy. For those living in India at the time of Vasubandhu, shame would have been a condition that reflected profoundly and negatively on oneself and one’s family, and which could do them great harm.
12. *Lack of dread of blame* – What is lack of dread of blame? It is a lack of dread towards others at offenses one has committed. It is a lack of dread, a lack of fearful or distasteful anticipation toward others and their responses to offenses one has committed against them. Lack of dread of blame is close to a current Western notion of “shamelessness.”
13. *Mental fogginess* – What is mental fogginess? It is a lack of skill in mental action, and is thick-headedness. This is not seeing things as they are (dependently arisen) and so having one’s judgment in a constant state of confusion and fogginess.
14. *Excitedness* – What is excitedness? It is lack of calm in citta. Excitedness arises from a falsely held belief. Excitedness arises from the belief that the affinities and aversions we hold toward others and externals are true and accurate, and like Mental Fogginess is rooted in delusion.
15. *Lack of faith* – What is lack of faith? It is a lack of trust in a citta, which is not in accord with faith, towards actions and its results, the [Four Noble]vTruths and the Gems. This is a lack of confidence that implementing the practices of Buddhism is an effective path toward ending suffering.
16. *Sloth* – What is sloth? It is a lack of enthusiasm towards the beneficial in a citta, and is that which is not in accord with vigor. This is an aversion towards working enthusiastically for the benefit of one’s practice; it is a mindset of disinclination.
17. *Carelessness* – What is carelessness? It is any non-guarding of citta from afflictions, and non-cultivation of the beneficial, which comes about by being linked with greed, hostility, confusion and sloth. This is not being alert to and aware of the state of our minds, especially with regard to greed, anger, delusion and laziness.
18. *Loss of mindfulness* – What is loss of mindfulness? It is an afflicted mindfulness, an unclarity as to the beneficial. This is being deprived of a mindful presence and mindset, and can result from indulging in Carelessness.
19. *Distractedness* – What is distractedness? It is any diffusion of citta, which partakes of greed, hostility, or confusions on the five sense-qualities of the realm of desire. These are confused, deluded thoughts that arise from sense contact, i.e., one’s mind is occupied with greed or hostility as a result of aversive contact, rather than recognizing the aversion as rooted in delusion.
20. *Lack of recognition* – What is lack of recognition. It is a judgment connected with afflictions, by which there is entry into not knowing what has been done by body, voice, or manas [See Appendix]. This is where the manas consciousness takes hold of us without our awareness that it is inflating our egos, bloating our sense of self, and deluding us.

The four secondary afflictions that are sometimes beneficial events associated with cittas:

1. *Regret*— What is regret? It is remorse, a piercing sensation in manas [See Appendix]. **Regret can sometimes be a mental state that leads one to stay on the middle path; sometimes not.**
2. *Torpor*— What is torpor? It is a contraction of citta which is without capacity for entering down into anything. **This can sometimes be a beneficial inaction; sometimes not. For example, one could experience sensations that at an earlier stage of practice could lead to Excitedness, but as we tamp down the influence of certain citta through practice, Torpor can result from certain situations rather than our previous reactions of Excitedness. On the other hand, Torpor can also easily be seen as a bridge to Sloth or other unbeneficial states.**
3. *Initial mental application* - What is initial mental application? It is a discourse of inquiry by manas [See Appendix], a certain kind of volition and discernment, which can be characterized as an indistinct state of citta. **The initial mental application can be thought of as an experience of sensation (contact) before it is processed into aversion or affinity. This can sometimes lead us to wisdom and wise choices; sometimes not.**
4. *Subsequent discursive thought* - What is subsequent discursive thought? It is a discourse of examination by manas [See Appendix], which in the same way can be characterized as a more precise state of citta. **This is a followup thought after initial mental application, the processing step, that can sometimes lead us to wisdom and wise choices; and sometimes not.**

The 13 Motivating Dispositions Disassociated from Cittas

Next, in the final two paragraphs of this section of the *Discussion* on the fourth aggregate, Vasubandhu asks, “What are the motivating dispositions disassociated from cittas?” They are prapti, appropriated conditions, the becoming connected with something attained, being intimately associated for a time. “Actually, prapti is a seed, a capacity, an approachment, and an adjustment to circumstances.” **[It is a latent imprint with potential to arise, which is “disassociated” from cittas, which are currently-arising and ceasing pre-cognitive and cognitively-processed contacts and associated mental actions.]**

1. The attainment without cognitions — What is the attainment free from cognitions? It is any cessation of non-stable events; cittas and events associated with cittas, which is totally clear and separate from attainments, and which comes about through a mental attention dispensing with cognitions about to arise, where former cognitions do not exist. **Here Vasubandhu is saying that, at certain profound levels of meditation and practice, a non-cognitive understanding of conditions arises; an attainment of freedom from thoughts arises.**
2. The attainment of the cessation of cognition and feelings — What is the attainment of the cessation of cognition and feelings? It is any cessation of non-stable and more stable events, cittas and events associated with cittas, which comes about through a mental attention dispensing with cognitions, continuing in which comes after the summits of existence have been practiced, and which is separate even from those attainments present in the stage-of-nothing-whatever. **Again, with deep meditation and practice, Vasubandhu is asserting we can attain a state of liberation from cognitive or affective cittas.**

3. Any non-meditative state without cognitions – What is a non-meditative state without conditions? It is the cessation of non-stable events; citta and events associated with citta, which takes place, for instance, within those groups of gods which are sentient, but do not have cognitions. **This is awareness without thinking when one is not meditating, which is motivational without the further creation of a sankhara, of thought about a story. Vasubandhu’s reference to “gods” here does not invoke any supernatural force, but is instead a reference to those who are accomplished enough in their practice to experience lack of cognition outside of a meditative state.**
4. Life-force – What is life-force? It is, as regards any events taking part in an organism, any continuity, for a certain time, of motivating dispositions which have been projected by past action. **Life-force is the seeming continuity of self that arises from dependently arisen, tightly formed karmic imprints, during a certain time frame and which are motivational.**
5. Taking part in an organism – What is taking part in an organism? It is any close relationship of bodily parts as regards sentient beings. **Here Vasubandhu is suggesting that the parts that makeup one’s body are partial determinants in one’s karma, one’s stories that arise from the manas and alaya consciousnesses.**
6. Birth – What is birth? It is any arising of a stream of motivating dispositions which has not already arisen, as regards any collection of events taking part in an organism. **Birth is what happens when a stream of thoughts, with regard to something specific, appears to start.**
7. Decrepitude – What is decrepitude? It is an alteration in the stream of those like that (i.e., events taking part in an organism). **“Decrepitude” is how Vasubandhu defines a stream of thoughts, a life-force, a body, which has the appearance of being worn out or broken down.**
8. Continuity – What is continuity? It is the serial propagation in the stream of those like that. **Continuity is this apparent single “stream” of tightly dependent events happening in succession.**
9. Lack of duration – What is lack of duration? It is the discontinuity in the stream of those like that. **Lack of duration is the term for an ending of a particular stream around an event.**
10. The collection of words – What is the collection of words? It is denotations for the own-beings of events. **Here Vasubandhu is saying that words denote a substantive beingness to events. The descriptive words strung together can lend Continuity to a stream.**
11. The collection of phrases – What is the collection of phrases? It is denotations for the particularities of events. **Here Vasubandhu is saying that phrases denote a substantive distinctiveness to events, a subcategory of the collection of words.**
12. The collection of syllables – What is the collection of syllables? They are the syllables of actual sound through which the other two [words and phrases] are disclosed. Though these all [words, phrases, and syllables] refer to speech, meanings are communicated dependent on words and phrases. For the same syllable does not arise with another synonym. **Words and phrases are collections of unique syllables with which meanings of people and places and events are communicated. The syllables can almost be thought of as analogous to pre-cognitive citta in the mental formations—they are the building blocks that are processed into the stream formed by the words, phrases and overall collection of words.**
13. The state of being separate from Dharma – What is the state of being separate from Dharma? It is the non-attainment of noble psychological events. **Being separate from the dharma means living in ignorance and suffering, and not pursuing clarity in thought and action.**

All of these together (from the Five Events Associated with Every Citta through the 13 Motivating Events Dissociated from Citta), all 64 of these, “they are called the aggregates of motivational dispositions.” In other words, our volitional formations, our motivational dispositions that comprise the fourth aggregate, fall into these categories, which break down into 64 mind-events or components. The understanding we are to take away from all this analysis is that the aggregates are not simple, isolated, individual “moment events,” not five unrelated elements, but rather are series of tightly dependently originating “heaps” (aggregate is skandha in Sanskrit which most literally translates as “heap”) of moment events which mass together to appear to form an apparently contiguous psycho-physical self.

Five - Consciousness

And what is Consciousness? It is an awareness of a sense object (a visible, a sound... a thought). These sense awareness events with their attendant motivating dispositions (the fourth aggregate with an assignment of a positive or negative affect them) coalesce to form the Self (through the *manas*). This Self is a state of seemingly continuous perceptions dependently arisen from sense contacts with sense objects. The Self does not arise independently--all notions of Self are completely dependent on foregoing sense contacts with affective content ascribed to them.

Importantly, this process can be interrupted, it does not need to be automatic or purely reactive. Vasubandhu declares that this Self-assembling process does not happen “in a Saint, [on] the Noble Path, or at the time of the attainment of cessation.” So, in accord with other Buddhist thinkers, Vasubandhu implies here that this “flow” of Self, which is the source of our suffering, halts with deep meditation and enlightenment, which is the attainment of cessation of notions of Self and is the realization of nirvana.

Here, Vasubandhu’s discussion of Consciousness, the fifth aggregate, has a different character to his exhaustive and organized presentation of the prior four aggregates. It seems to attempt a similar method, listing elements of the aggregate, but lacks the cohesion and linear flow of his discussions of the earlier aggregates. Because of this, the discussion gives the impression that it may not have been as fully thought-out, as its relative disorganization and inconsistent use of certain terms (some of which we note below) make it read like an unfinished work - like we are looking at Vasubandhu’s notes rather than the finished product related to the other four aggregates. Still, this section has some interesting and useful insights, especially his categorization of the Sense Fields and Sense Domains, as well as useful discussions in its conclusion, even if the middle section with the less finished categorizations is less informative. As before, we have interwoven below our commentary with Vasubandhu’s words, putting our commentary in red text where it isn’t clear from context where our thoughts start and Vasubandhu’s end.

Parenthetically, why this model, why are the aggregates designated and differentiated in this way? Because it is when these various aggregates are collected together ‘in heaps’ that “times,” “series,” “aspects,” “development,” and even “sense-objects” themselves seem to occur. This five-aggregate model explains not only the arising of the psycho-physical Self, but the apparent continuity of one’s personality without there being an inherent Self or “soul.” Explaining the arising of a psycho-physical Self (the two—psycho and physical, are not separate entities) in this way is an important understanding Vasubandhu wants to share with his reader, for it explains memory and continuity of personality, topics that were rife with debate in Vasubandhu’s Indian of the fifth century. Our

mental awareness and our physicality are generally thought of as separate entities in Western philosophy—thanks to Descartes’s dualism; they are “empty” constituents of our aggregated Self as in Buddhist philosophy. Note the blending of the physical and the mental in the next concluding section of the *Discussion*.

In the concluding section of the *Discussion*, Vasubandhu examines each of the elements of consciousness and their characteristics. Here is his breakdown. Sense Fields are fields of cognition, they consist of the first two columns below: eye and visibles, ear and sounds, nose and smells, etc. Sense Domains are Sense Fields with the addition of the last column, the consciousness column: eye and visibles (the Sense Field), plus visual consciousness, ear and sounds, plus auditory consciousness, etc. Although Vasubandhu’s discussion doesn’t present them in a conveniently organized and linear fashion, they are combined, charted and diagrammed here for simplicity:

Sense Domains			
Sense Fields			
<i>6 Sense Organs</i>	<i>6 Sense Contacts</i>	<i>(Notes)</i>	<i>6 Consciousnesses</i>
Eye	Visibles		Visual consciousness
Ear	Sounds		Auditory consciousness
Nose	Smells		Olfactory consciousness
Tongue	Tastes		Gustatory consciousness
Body	Tactile sensations	Four great elements and everything touchable	Tactile consciousness
Manas	Mentally cognizables	Feelings, cognitions, motivating dispositions, unmanifest action, and the un compounded (emptiness)	Mental consciousness

As you can see above, at this point in the *Discussion*, Vasubandhu is outlining the aggregates as having 18 elements: 6 sense organs, 6 sense contacts, and 6 consciousnesses. In addition, it needs to be noted, the consciousnesses all “empty into” the storehouse consciousness, the *alaya*.

Later in his discussion of the fifth aggregate, Vasubandhu freely makes observations and provides categorizations of the Sense Fields, Consciousnesses and Sense Domains (and to a lesser degree, the *alaya*), often without clearly saying which of these categories of the elements of consciousness he is discussing. To make it easier to follow, remember that:

Sense Fields = Sense Organs + Sense Contacts
 6 Sense Fields:

Eye + Visible
Ear + Sounds
Nose + Smells
Tongue + Tastes
Body + Tactile Sensations
Manas + Mentally Cognizables

Sense Domains = Sense Fields + their corresponding Consciousnesses

6 Sense Domains

Eye + Visible + Visual Consciousness
Ear + Sounds + Auditory Consciousness
Nose + Smells + Olfactory Consciousness
Tongue + Tastes + Gustatory Consciousness
Body + Tactile Sensations + Tactile Consciousness
Manas + Mentally Cognizables + Mental Consciousness

Alaya = The “storehouse” into which all the consciousnesses “empty.” The collection of previous consciousnesses that supplies consciousness building blocks for the notion of Self.

Vasubandhu further categorizes certain of the Sense Fields and Domains:

The aggregate of materiality is the five sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body) and the five sense contacts (visibles, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations). Mind is not included here (see aggregate of consciousness below). These are categorized under the heading of unmanifest action.

The aggregate of consciousness is the *manas* and the seven “consciousnesses” (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental plus the alaya).

Feelings, cognitions, and motivating dispositions, the other three aggregates, are products of the aggregates of materiality, and may be categorized under it, and of consciousness, as well as unmanifest action and the uncompounded. When examined, we see that the second, third, and fourth aggregates (feelings, cognitions, and motivating dispositions, as well as consciousness—consciousness at least in part) all arise from the first aggregate—materiality—from our and the world’s physical form.

These, feelings, cognitions, and motivating dispositions are Domains, Vasubandhu explains, because they grasp an “open characteristic,” though without a “doer.” In other words, they have the capacity to produce a desired effect without an autonomous Self being involved, which means that our “personality” is empty. This concept is counterintuitive to many people – how can there be a “subjective” experience like a feeling without something (a Self) doing the experiencing? In this framework, the feeling-experience is revealed as arising (dependent upon) not from a “Self,” but instead upon there being an external sense contact, combined with one or more of the sense organs and a consciousness that includes processing of the other two elements. The personality is just the “pile” of these prior events, and this method of describing it helps accentuate how dependent it is upon the particular flow of prior events, there is no core or self-sufficient aspect to it at all.

Further to this, there are three kinds of grasping after Self that Vasubandhu lists: grasping for Self as a central entity (soul), grasping for the “enjoyer,” and grasping for a “doer.” These latter two, the enjoyer and the doer, are unique understandings of this from Vasubandhu and present us with further dimensions for categorizing, and hence understanding and ultimately ending our grasping and suffering.

Finally, Vasubandhu addresses four further aspects of Consciousness related to the Sense Fields:

Space – What is space? It is the interval separating materialities. Vasubandhu is saying that space is not a thing, as several Buddhist schools in his time were asserting, but rather is just an interval between materialities, and not itself a separately-existing materiality. Today we would say this is reasonably accurate, for according to modern science, space is, if you ignore the galaxies and stars, dark matter, and the very very tiny amounts carbon and hydrogen found in it, mainly a boundless dimensionality between materialities, as Vasubandhu said.

Cessation not through contemplation – What is cessation not through contemplation? It is any non-separation from cessation, without antidotes to afflictions figuring in. Cessation, or liberation from our psychophysical Self, not through contemplation, occurs without the use of antidotes, without intellectual scrutiny examining the four noble truths. Antidotes here can be best understood as mindstates used to remedy or eliminate afflictions, such as patience being the antidote to anger, and generosity being the antidote to greed. Meditation without such contemplation is a deep meditation state through which the practitioner gains an immediate experience of emptiness.

Cessation through contemplation – What is cessation through contemplation? It is any non-separation from cessation, any constant non-arising of aggregates through antidotes to afflictions. This is state of cessation of suffering, of liberation, with antidotes (specifically the Four Noble Truths) figuring in.

Suchness – What is suchness? It is the “inherent nature” of an event, it is selflessness of events. This is emptiness, the ultimate nature of reality, which is a descriptor, not an entity. Somewhat confusingly, Vasubandhu uses the phrase “inherent nature” as applied to an event, when it is clear that no event (or object) has a true inherent nature (i.e., a set of qualities that is permanent to that event or object, that arise independently rather than in dependence on prior events) – the use of quotations around the phrase is to show that emptiness (the lack of any inherent nature) ultimately describes all events.

The final long paragraph of the fifth aggregate discussion takes a Q&A format and is meant to drive us deep into an examination of the sense fields and sense domains so that we can better understand how our minds work and use this understanding to reduce our suffering. As Vasubandhu puts it:

Among the 18 sensory domains (that we have described above as the 6 Sense Domains), which contain materiality? Whatever has the “own being” of the aggregates of materiality. Quite possibly, Vasubandhu is referring to all 18. Again, the use of quotes around “own being” shows that Vasubandhu means this phrase in the context of an understanding that emptiness ultimately

describes all the domains, i.e., we can explain the domains as conventionally existing by saying they have an “own [inherent] being,” always keeping in mind that they are ultimately empty of any inherent qualities and/or existence.

Which do not contain materialities? The rest. It is unclear what domains exactly Vasubandhu is referring to here, as he seems to capture all 18 potential interfaces with the world by his reference to the “18 sensory domains” in the preceding sentence, but it appears that he may simply be discussing the consciousnesses in isolation, i.e., without the Sense Fields, leaving “domains” of pure consciousnesses.

Which can be seen? Only the sensory domain of visibles is an object of sense which can be seen. Eye and visibles.

Which are invisible? The rest of them.

Vasubandhu wants us to understand that visibles are limited to the eye sense field, and that any other perception is a distortion and delusion. Smells, for example, have nothing to do with things we see. In addition, imagined visibles, bringing to mind a visual experience (such as in a dream), is a mind-event, not a visible event.

Which exercise resistance? The ten which contain materiality (the five sense organs: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body; and the five sense contacts: visibles, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations), and which exercise resistance on each other. Vasubandhu means that these are very tightly dependently arisen, and interact in a way that seems to retard or slow their motion.

Which do not exercise resistance? The rest of them. The rest of them here are the fields and domains of the *manas* or mind, the mentally cognizables, plus the fields and domains of the six consciousnesses. Vasubandhu thinks that the speed of thought exceeds that of material events.

Which are liable to be connected with afflictions? Fifteen: here Vasubandhu appears to be referring to the 15 individual elements composing the Domains outside the *manas* Domain.

Which are not liable to be connected with afflictions? Part of the last three. Part of *manas*, mentally cognizables, and mental consciousness – these are sometimes part of the arising of afflictions, and sometimes, like in deep meditation, where there is a lack of an ascription of affect, not a part of the arising of afflictions.

Which occur in the realm of desire? All of them. The five aggregates, fields and domains, are, as we see here, desire-based in our everyday life and so are an unending source of suffering.

Which occur in the realm of simple images? Fourteen: it appears that Vasubandhu means all of the elements except smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and mentally cognizables—the rest of the elements (and their resulting Sense Fields and Sense Domains) are eye- and visibles-based. By including the mentally cognizables, Vasubandhu again makes it clear that he thinks mental constructs are not visible in nature.

Which occur in the imageless sphere? Part of the last three. It appears that Vasubandhu means to continue his thought from the prior simple images thought, but the numbers don't add up perfectly

- there are 18 elements, but if we add the prior 14 to these “last three” we only get 17 total. In any event, these last three seem to include part of *manas*, mentally cognizables, and mental consciousness. These do not arise from the eye field or domain, although by noting that only “part of” them are imageless, Vasubandhu clearly thinks that mental consciousnesses can include images.

Which are included with the aggregates? All of them except the un compounded. The un compounded are those that have not undergone processing to assign affinity/aversion and discursive meaning. These arise during deep states of meditation when there is a pure awareness, an awareness without a compounded story defining things in the moment.

Which are included within the appropriating aggregates? Those consisting of “personality.” Vasubandhu is agreeing here with Nagarjuna and other Buddhist thinkers that the “personality” is really the storehouse consciousness combined with the grasping and attachments that go with it.

Which are beneficial, which unbeneficial, and which are indeterminate? Ten may belong to any of the three categories. The ten are the seven sensory consciousnesses (eye-consciousness through mind-consciousness) plus visibles, sounds, and mentally cognizables. There is another unclear numbering issue here - Vasubandhu mentions seven sensory consciousnesses, but he must mean the 6 sensory consciousnesses (visual auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile and mental), plus the alaya or storehouse consciousness. Here Vasubandhu is only mentioning consciousnesses. These last three can be either beneficial or unbeneficial, depending on how we interpret what we see, how we speak, or what we think.

The rest of them are all indeterminate. Indeterminate, meaning they can fall into either the beneficial or the unbeneficial category.

Which are internal? Twelve of them: all of them except visibles, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and mentally cognizables. Again, Vasubandhu must be including here the alaya or storehouse consciousness in his count as 12 + the seven he mentions are 19 total, which would be each domain of three elements plus the alaya.

Which are external? Six: visibles, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and mentally cognizables. Mentally cognizables are viewed here as arising from our physical form and so are included as externals, though this is an unusual “external.”

Which have an object of consciousness? The seven sensory domains of *citta* (the domain of eye through the domain of *manas*, plus the alaya consciousness, which is added to the *Discussion* here even though it is not part of the sense field/domain model), and events that are associated with *citta*.

Which are without an object of consciousness? The ten others (visibles, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and cognizables; visible, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile consciousnesses) and most of the sensory domains of mentally cognizables.

Which contain discrimination? Discrimination here is the ability to characterize and define. The sensory domains of *manas*, mental consciousness, and mentally cognizables. In an attempt to keep

our nomenclature consistent, we would refer to the *manas*, mental consciousness and mentally cognizables as “elements” rather than “domains,” which term we use for sets of related elements (e.g., *manas* + mentally cognizables + mental consciousness = the *Manas Domain*).

Which do not contain discrimination? The rest of them. The rest of them being the sense fields and sense domains of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body.

Which are appropriated (as aggregates, as self and of self)? Five of the six sense organs, those that appear to have external contacts (not mind/*manas*).

Which are unappropriated (not part of a particular aggregate series)? All visibles, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations that are not integral parts of the sensory organism which are functional. These are the ones discussed earlier as having (conventionally) an “own being.” Functional is when the consciousness appropriate to it has arisen or will arise.

Which are non-functional? The same when the appropriate consciousness has not arisen and will not be arising.

Vasubandhu’s text ends abruptly here, all five aggregates having been discussed.

Appendix

Understanding Consciousness and the Arising of *Manas* Consciousness

There are three kinds of consciousness for Vasubandhu: sense consciousness, storehouse consciousness, and *manas*. These arise in dependence upon each other.

1. *Sense consciousness*, the consciousness that comes from our six senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, and mind. We sometimes call these senses “gates,” or “doors,” because all objects of perception enter consciousness through our sensory contact with them. Sense consciousness always has three components: first, the sense organ (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind); second, the sense object itself (the object we’re smelling or the sound we’re hearing or the thought we are thinking); and third, sense consciousness, our initial (basic or primitive) experience of what we are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, or thinking, i.e., the object of sense contact comes into, in contact with the sense organ and undergoes mental processing to create the “process” of perception (sense consciousness).
2. *Storehouse consciousness* refers to the storing and also to what is stored—that is, all the neural imprints that we have had based on our past actions of body, speech, and mind. In Buddhist jargon, this information is stored as “seeds.” Storehouse consciousness has the capacity to receive the seed, store it, maintain it and preserve it for potential future use. At a certain point, the seed analogy falls apart, so throughout Deep Dharma we often use “imprint” in place of or as a synonym for “seed.”

3. *Manas consciousness*: Storehouse consciousness is an object of attachment. In storehouse consciousness there are elements of ignorance—delusion, anger, fear— that are part of the seeds, and these elements form a force of energy that clings, that wants to possess. This force is called *manas*. We will describe *manas* in a few different ways to get the idea firmly across: *Manas* consciousness has at its root the belief in a separate self, the belief in our personhood, which is perceived to be here and independent and autonomous entity. It is responsible for the fact that all our perceptions, all our narratives about what is happening, start with an “I.” Such an ignorant starting point! This consciousness, the feeling and instinct for “I am,” is the function of *manas*—to cling to store consciousness as a separate Self. *Manas* is the appropriator—appropriating stories from the storehouse consciousness and appropriating them as “me,” and “of me.” *Manas* is always operating. It never lets go of store consciousness. It arises from store consciousness and it turns around and embraces store consciousness as its object: “You are me, you are mine.” The function of *manas* is to appropriate store consciousness as its own through the lenses of “I,” “me,” “my,” “mine.”