

## The Five Aggregates

An introduction to the aggregates as a metaphor  
for how our psychophysical Self arises.

### *Forget Self-Actualization; the Gateway to Peacefulness is No-Self*

Self-actualization is what philosophy, psychiatry and psychology generally see, usually through Abraham Maslow's hierarchy, as the pinnacle of a person's being. Self-actualized people are those who, we are taught in schools, colleges, and universities, are fulfilled and doing all they are maximally capable of. It assumes a strong ego and a "person" desire to be fulfilled, whatever that means: ego?, self?, personhood?; also, a strong ego-driven desire to be one's genuine self, to be one's authentic and true self, to be real and bona fide, again, whatever those terms may mean.

Buddhism sees this as ridiculous—because there is no true Self to actualize. No permanent Self that somehow inhabits our body but is separate from it, and which can be actualized. Instead, Buddhism sees who we are as stories, as fictions that create the structure for and continuous reinforcement of the phantom Self, the Self that only exists as a concept in our imagination. Rather than representing the ultimate goal (self-actualization), the notion of the Self is actually the cause of suffering, as our Self is a construct based on the illusion that getting what our stories tell us to be desirable is what will make us authentic and whole, when in fact, it leaves us always wanting and always unsatisfied.

The Five Aggregates is the metaphor for how we create our illusory psychophysical Self and how it leads to suffering. In deconstructing the notion of the Self and showing it to be an empty concept, it is exactly the opposite of what we are taught in self-actualization settings.

Our approach here is to present the Five Aggregates as an operational model, a soteriological tool, a raft, that explains how Self arises and what that means for us, our suffering, and our practice. This is not meant as a scholarly analysis, more a functional explanation. Key terms will be detailed as much as necessary to understand what the aggregates are and how they function, alone and together.

The aggregates are conventionally presented as a raft to understanding Self and No Self and how to deconstruct Self and No Self to lead us away from our self-imposed storytelling and its attendant suffering. While the Five Aggregates are a central teaching of Buddhism, what seemed odd to Andy and Carl when they began to study for this commentary was how little of the aggregate literature presented them as a functional schema, as a metaphor.

So we decided to make that our approach. Part of the decision was that we would use English terms, not Sanskrit or Pali, to make the commentary easier to follow. Occasionally it is necessary for us to define a Sanskrit word, but once defined, we decided we would stay with the English as much as possible. This includes the terms for the aggregates as well others.

*Sense Contact ⇒ Feeling ⇒ Cognition ⇒ Karmic Stories ⇒ Consciousness*

To understand the Five Aggregates, we have to understand what they are, from a Buddhist perspective. As we explained above, they are the five-step schema that explains how our psychophysical Self arises: *Sense Contact ⇒ Feeling ⇒ Cognition ⇒ Karmic Stories ⇒ Consciousness*.

Put another way, we are neuro-processing machines that absorb information through our senses, convert it into stories based on our previous understandings of the world (our karma), self-identify with, and then act from those stories. The Five Aggregates is how we create a sense contact and transform it, through three intermediate steps, into our consciousness, our self-awareness of who we are.

This illustrates how every narrative or story we create (the 4<sup>th</sup> aggregate) arises, on some level, to relieve suffering by telling us what is good for us (2<sup>nd</sup> aggregate). Structurally it tells us that, on the most basic level, all sentient beings want to end their suffering by getting more of those things we label as desirable and less of those we label as undesirable (2<sup>nd</sup> aggregate). Unfortunately, the way the aggregates go about doing this results in more, not less, suffering, for it leaves us in a perpetual state of desire and discomfort. But when deeply understood, we can deconstruct our stories with the aggregates and use them to relieve rather than produce a suffering-Self.

This exposition will be presenting the aggregates largely as a linear event, starting with (1) Sense Contact and going to (5) Consciousness, but it is a considerably more complex event. To show the complexity, we offer, in addition to a linear diagram, three other diagrams—a circle, a series of interrelated loops, and a star. The latter presentations show the complex interrelationship of the aggregates that are not apparent in the linear picture. In the circle we see that (5) consciousness leads back to (1) sense contact, and so on in a never-ending cycle. In the loops we see how Self starts and is guided throughout by consciousness. And in the star we see how each of the five points (aggregates) is related to all the others in a never-ending interdependency.

The linear diagram is below a simple succession of words and as a picture on page 7, the circle, loops, and star diagrams are in the End Notes. The three diagrams in the End Notes are meant for you to contemplate after you have become thoroughly familiar with the aggregates through this commentary.

### The Five Aggregates

*Sense Contact ⇒ Feeling ⇒ Cognition ⇒ Karmic Stories ⇒ Consciousness*

Understanding the five aggregates is critical to understanding the essential teachings of Buddhism because all the teachings can be seen to arise from the Five Aggregates. For example:

We cannot understand Karma, the teaching that is often viewed as the most important teaching of the dharma, without understanding the Five Aggregates, especially aggregate four, which is our Karma. And we cannot understand Self and No Self, the problem and the solution to our suffering without understanding the Five Aggregates.

Achieving a peaceful mind, and ultimately liberation, requires Wisdom, and Wisdom cannot be understood without knowing deeply the Five Aggregates. This is emphatically pointed out to us in the Heart Sutra ( <http://www.deepdharma.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/HS-Final-12-22-20.pdf> ).

On another level, the Five Aggregates provide the basis for the Noble Eightfold Path, for creating imprints and foundations for right thinking (right views and right intentions) and right behaviors (right action, right livelihood, right speech, and right effort), providing the perspective we need to gradually lessen and eventually end our uneasiness with our lives and the world through the insights that arises from right mindfulness and meditation, and concentration that arises from them.

Also, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, which are one of the doctrinal bases for awareness, arise from the Five Aggregates and cannot be understood without a deep realization of the Aggregates. The first foundation is mindfulness of body and arises from the first aggregate (generally translated as “body” in this mindfulness model); the second foundation is mindfulness of feeling and arises from the second aggregate, feeling; the third foundation is mindfulness of mind and arises from the third and fourth aggregates together; and the fourth foundation, mindfulness of mind, arises from the fourth and fifth aggregates.

### **What Are the Five Aggregates?**

As we have said the Five Aggregates form the structure that we defines who we are. We are, after all, simply the aggregation of all the sense contacts we have ever had, and their attendant stories. My awareness of who I am is defined by what I have experienced in my life, and those experiences are all initiated by my sense contacts. I am, reductionistically, all that I have seen, heard, tasted, touched, felt or thought (Mind and thought are a sixth sense in Buddhism), plus the embellishments we make to them when they are our current story.

Stated again, the Five Aggregates are the way we process information, explaining the process by which we go from a sense contact to defining our conscious awareness of who we are by that sense experience. They are the way we take a sense stimulus (like seeing an object or hearing music) organize and label it, determine what to do with it by creating a narrative, a fiction, a story about it, and finally make it a part of how we see ourselves, how we understand who we are. “I am the kind of person who likes Mahler,” for example, is an appropriation of our story from the fourth aggregate into our conscious awareness, forming a component of how we define our Self.

The Five Aggregates The Five Aggregates are not only the structural definition of who we are, of our Self and our preferences and notions, values and ideas, but these aggregates are the greatest tool we have for understanding and analyzing our experiences so that we can end our clinging and attachment to our senses and to the idea that having more sensory stimulation will make us peaceful when in fact is just makes us more anxious.

The aggregates show us a way out of our suffering. When realized deeply, the Five Aggregates provide us with a roadmap to end our suffering through scrutiny and deconstructions, to the “views” needed to end our suffering.

The main view, and the whole thrust of the aggregates is that the Five Aggregates are the process that leads us to define our world as always in need of more of the sensory stimuli we like and want and think we should have, leaving us never satisfied, always worried and unsatisfied. When understood and seen for what they are, not a source of ease and calm and mere awareness, but a source of craving and clinging, the Five Aggregates can be used to loosen our bonds to the three poisons: greed, anger, and delusion.

### How the Five Aggregates Work

What we see from meditating, and what we have started explaining, is that we define ourselves by the things we have experienced. The Five Aggregates, then, are a breakdown of how we create and operate this definition of Me as a person. Understanding the Five Aggregates, which are the source of all our clinging and consequently all our suffering, allows us to weaken our attachments in the most profound way. We can also use this model to redefine ourselves, not as people propelled through life by desire, but as peaceful beings here for the benefit of others. The Five Aggregates explain how our existence is conditioned and how all phenomena are impermanent, non-self and suffering; how all things are empty of inherent, autonomous meaning, and how even emptiness is empty.

### Defining the Aggregates

1. *Rupa* is the Sanskrit word for the first aggregate, what we are defining as “sense contact.” It is most frequently translated as “form.” Form meaning all material phenomena, and specifically here for our understanding, form includes our material bodies. From a pragmatic perspective, *form is a physical aspect of our body, it is our sense organs: eye, ear, nose...or mind.* Buddhist commentators have traditionally noted that the six sense organs and their objects can be categorized into 18 “sense realms,” three realms for each sense, each composed of a sense, a corresponding sense objects, and sense consciousnesses.

In Buddhism, there are considered to be six sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, throat, body, and mind). Each sense organ has a sense object, eyes have visible objects, ears have sounds...mind has thoughts. And each has a level of awareness to the contact that is called its “consciousness,” ear consciousness for example.

Here's how the 18 sense realms look in a chart:

<i>Sense Organ:</i>	Eyes	Ears	Ears	Nose	Throat	Body	Mind
<i>Sense Object:</i>	Visibles	Sounds	Sounds	Odors	Tastes	Tactile Sensations	Thoughts
<i>Consciousness</i>	Eye Consciousness	Ear Consciousness	Ear Consciousness	Nose Consciousness	Throat Consciousness	Sensation Consciousness	Thought Consciousness

2. **Vedana** is the Sanskrit word for the second aggregate, which we will translate, from a soteriological point of view, as “feeling.” Feeling is singular – it is the affinity or the aversion that arises within us from each sense contact. Since every contact becomes either desirable or undesirable, “feeling” is seen as the hedonic bifurcation of all of our contacts.

Note that there is no neutral. If a contact had no positive nor negative value to our survival, then we simply don't process it<sup>1</sup>. Were we to, two things would happen – first we would get caught in a situation where we wouldn't know what to do (being the contact had no value), and second, we would be on sensory overload, for this is the point in the aggregates where we eliminate from our processing all the thousands and thousands of unnecessary sensory events.

Vedana/feeling is not cognized, it is simply a tone, a positive or negative value, through which the sense contact will become interpreted into a story. This “feeling” is a precondition for greed, for getting more of those contacts with which we associate an affinity, and for getting rid of those contacts with which we associate an aversion. Whether it is positive or negative, it is about getting, about desiring more or less of the contact, about greed. This means that whether it is an affinity or an aversion, it leads to suffering. It leads to a thirst for more.

Note that suffering arises from an affinity because we need to protect and defend it, and get more of it; and that suffering also arises from aversion because we need to avoid it or rid ourselves of it, and to defend doing so.

We should mention here three words that are important to understand what we have just explained: eustress, distress, and resilience. Eustress is the stress that arises in us when we like something (it is measurable by the amount of cortisol released when we get excited about liking something). Distress happens when the stimuli is negative, something we don't like, and so cortisol is released. And resilience, in Buddhist terms is labeled “equanimity,” the ability to move from one event to another event without releasing cortisol, the hormone that causes, likewise, anxiety and stress.

3. **Sanna** is the Sanskrit word for the third aggregate, which we will translate, from a soteriological point of view, as “cognition.” Cognition in the sense of recognizing the contact and its attendant feeling tone, and choosing to cognize it, choosing to create a story about it based on our karma, our previous understandings of the people, places, things, events, mindstates, etc., in our memory bank, our alaya (karmic) storehouse, which is the fourth aggregate. If we were to cognize every sensory contact we encounter, we would be on sensory overload, unable to function because of so much input. So this is the aggregate where we filter in those contacts that are meaningful, seemingly important and weighty, and filter out those that are not.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a complexity here that we are not going to address. It involves whether or not one can make a sense contact and not develop a feeling. Were that the case, with just a few machinations, one can see how a neither positive nor negative response could lead to the state called nirvana. A very lengthy discussion of this can be found in Mathieu Boisvert's book *The Five Aggregates, Understanding Theravada Psychology and Soteriology*.

“Recognition,” “naming” or “labeling” are other translations of *sanna* we occasionally find in the exegetical literature. Because they imply that there is going to be cognition, we have chosen “cognition” as our translation for this third aggregate.

4. *Sankara* is the Sanskrit word for the fourth aggregate, which we will translate from a soteriological point of view as “karmic story.” All our stories, of course, arise intentionally, which is why this fourth aggregate is often translated as “volitional formations,” and why it is always karmic. Being intentional in nature, these stories, these narratives, tell us what is happening and how to respond to it. Having arisen as a story, it goes from our storehouse to our mind, to our consciousness, the fifth aggregate. Occasionally, more than one story is created and, in those cases, the mind will either discard the extra stories, the stories that don’t seem to quite fit with the previous three aggregates, or it will send both to consciousness (the fifth aggregate) in which case we experience conflict or dissonance.

*Volitional formations* are the stories, the ideas, the fabricated tales, fictions and narratives we put together and tell ourselves about the contact; these are our imprints, our seeds that will ripen into future stories. They are *our karma*.

5. *Vinnana* is the Sanskrit word for the fifth aggregate, which we will translate as “consciousness.” Once a story reaches this stage, we become aware of it. We are free, within certain bounds, to change the story. If a story is causing us to be unsatisfied and to be uncomfortable, to be “suffering,” we can rewrite the story to lessen the suffering. *Consciousness* is the appropriation and identification by our mind with the sense contact and with the contact and its affect: “I hear music,” “I smell the bread,” and “I am the kind of person who hates Mahler” or “I am the kind of person who loves the smell of freshly baked bread,” etc.

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*Let’s review how this works:* When we make a sense contact, we immediately develop a positive or negative feeling about it. We take that contact and feeling and put a simple label on it, which allows us to have a handle for perception, for perceiving it. With this perception in hand, we search around in our storehouse (our karmic stories, our volitional formations) until we find the previous action that seems most appropriate for telling us what to do with our current perception of the contact and its affect. Finally, we send the story to our conscious mind where we define our Self by appropriating and identifying with our story. So it becomes “I am the kind of person who...(whatever the story is).” Finally, we declare the story “my story,” mine. For example, “I like Mahler; Mahler is my favorite composer.”

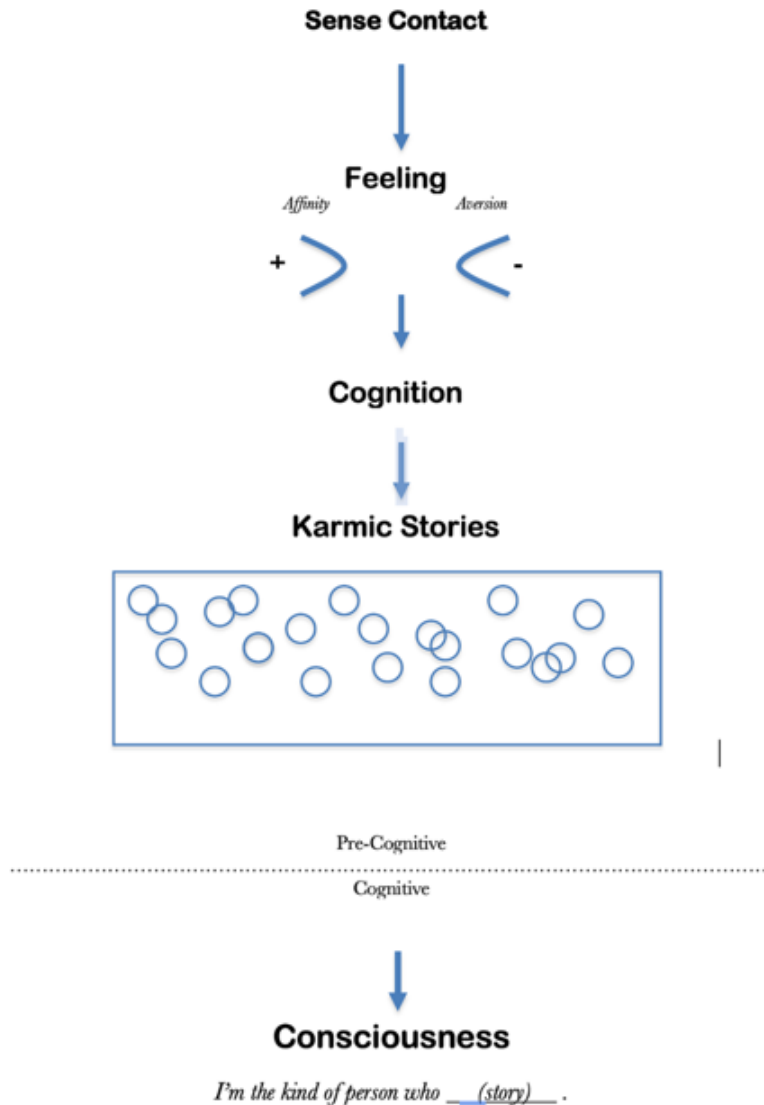
*And here’s the problem with how it works:* when we have a sense contact (form and feeling), like tasting or touching something, we do a search of our database to determine its meaning, value, and what to do with it.

Unfortunately, like all web searches, the hits are listed by “relevance” and sometimes even the top hit is far from relevant. That’s why we might mistake a shadow for a threatening person behind a tree; that’s why we mistake a stick for a snake when the light is poor. When we are not

seeing clearly, and we are always slightly off in our perceptions and attendant stories, anxiety and stress arise. More about this will be explained later in the commentary.

So, we are left, though we may not be aware of it, forever at least a little uneasy, a little uncomfortable with what is happening, or maybe even a lot uncomfortable and in pain with what is happening. This lack of ease, this discomfort, pervades our lives—sometimes so minimally we don't notice it, but most times leaving us with a background level of anxiety that flares up and cools down in ways that seem beyond our control.

To understand how the Five Aggregates work, we must first gain an understanding of the aggregates from a linear perspective, then we can deepen that understanding into a more profound spherical understanding of them and their interrelationship.



Let`s unpack the linear progression:

### 1. *Sense Contact*

All of our perceptions occur through our sense contacts. In Buddhism there are six senses and six attending sense objects: eyes and material objects we see, ears and sounds we hear, nose and odors, mouth and flavors, body and things we feel, and mind and thoughts we think. In the traditional Western understanding of how our minds work there are only five senses, but in the Buddhist model, mind and thought are added as a sixth sense.

At the moment of contact, we process the input just enough to have the merest, barest awareness of it. We take this implication of awareness and decide either to filter it out or to allow it to flow into the next step where we will create both a physical and a mental response to it. We do this by having a consciousness (in essence the total of our past experience of processing through the Five Aggregates) that recognizes and evaluates the contact. So everything starts with a contact.

This barest awareness is where *dukkha*, suffering, begins, which explains why *dukkha* is one of the dharma seals, a characteristic of all phenomena. The contact leads to the second aggregate, feeling, which sets the tone for us to understand the contact – the tone being either an affinity or an aversion.

### 2. Feeling

Feeling is the word we use for the sensations that arise when a sense contact occurs.

At this stage, which is still minimal awareness, we decide if the contact is pleasant or unpleasant and sensations arise that reflect our affinity or aversion for the contact. Usually, at this point, we aren`t even aware of the event that is happening. What we notice is the bodily sensation and response, caused by the release of peptide chains in our blood, which then signal a biological (hormonal) response to the sense contact. For example, we feel nauseous standing in front of the window on the 75<sup>th</sup> floor of an office building before we notice we are looking out the window without even a ledge between us and the outside.

This second stage, “feeling,” this having of an affinity or aversion for everything, is the source of our preferences, our attachments. It is both physical and mental simultaneously. It sets the tone for how we will activate eustress or distress—meaning how we will create suffering.

Together form and feeling provide enough information for us to move to the third stage, perception, where we choose a label for the event so we know what to do with the developing event, and whether it is something for which we have an affinity or an aversion.

### 3. Perception

This is the point where we find a key word to describe, internally and perhaps externally, what is happening. It is a simple naming or labeling of the unfolding event that will allow us to explore



our previous memories and experiences to determine our course of action. But if we choose apple instead of pear, or hose instead of snake, which often happens because of a lack of clarity about what is happening, we are going to forge ahead with a wrong or inappropriate response.

#### 4. Karmic Stories - Volitional Formations

This is the source of everything we are and do and have a propensity to do. These are our seeds and our stories, our karmic understandings, about our sense contact. These are all our memories and memory fragments of past sense contacts and experiences. We come here, to what is called our *alaya* consciousness, to rehearse and determine what to do with a sense contact. These stories allow us to understand, to interpret and explain our sense contacts. We search for a close match to the contact with its feeling, or synthesize something from several close or related past experiences, and that becomes our new response.

We sometimes call these Volitional Formations because each of these karmic stories came to be here because of an intentional choice we made. *These stories, then, are our Karma.* Here Karma is understood as our propensity to action. Being that we can only choose to act in ways for which we have imprints (sometimes metaphorically called seeds), when we pull a seed, our actions become volitional and we become responsible for our Karma. This is a much more meaningful and complex understanding of Karma than the colloquial idea that if we do good, good will result. In fact, what we see here is that all stories are distorted and problematic. They all arise from a lack of clarity.

For us now, the goal is to learn to choose stories, or modify the ones which arise in our consciousness, and in doing so we lead ourselves away from karmic stories that are a source of suffering and instead lead us toward long term peace and happiness. For example, choosing stories based in patience, compassion, and generosity, rather than the greed, anger, and delusion.

So this fourth aggregate is the single most important doctrine in Buddhism: Karma. It is the source of our narratives which are assembled in this fourth aggregate and then arise in our conscious minds, telling us what to do.

#### 5. Consciousness

Once we've become aware of the story (aggregates one through four are precognitive), which is the best understanding of the sense contact we can make at a given time considering the conditions at the moment of contact, we do two things: we appropriate and identify with the seed and we reinforce the strength of the seed so that it pops up higher on the list of choices for us the next time we have a similar sense contact.

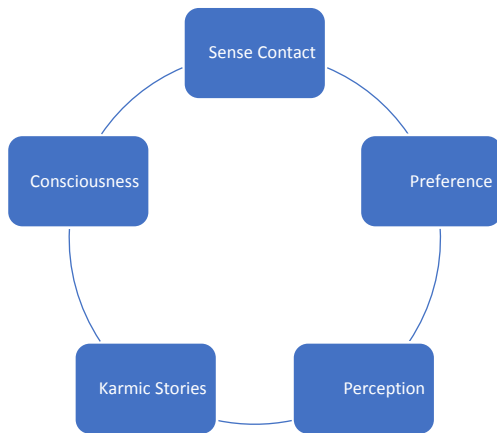
We all have a consciousness, an awareness of self, of who we are. I am Carl, and I know who Carl is. When Carl appropriates and identifies with a seed that has been pulled in response to a sense contact, I say to myself: I am (Carl is) the kind of person who does what the chosen seed indicates when this type of sense contact occurs. This process of appropriation and identification with the seeds sounds like this: Carl is the kind of person who loves Mahler, or I hate frozen broccoli.

**In a very brief linear summary, once a (1) sense contact occurs, we assign it an (2) affinity or an aversion. Next, if it seems important, we (3) cognize it, turning it into a (4) narrative to tell our (5) conscious mind how to respond.**

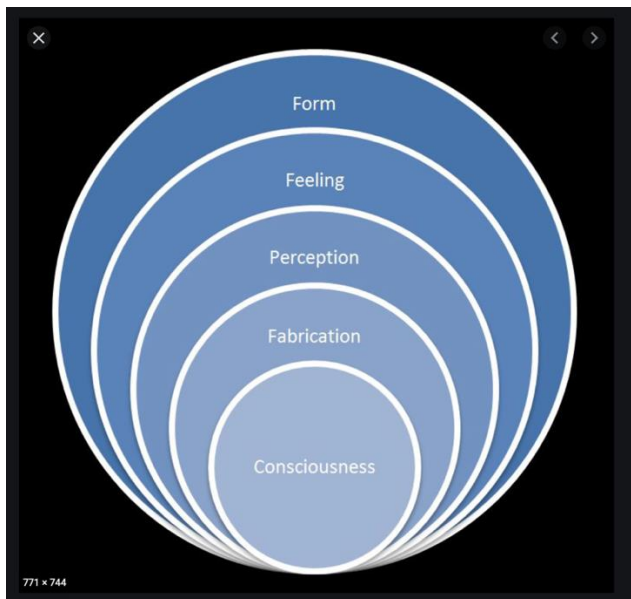
There is a critically important understanding that we have only hinted at: each of the five aggregates is empty and the five together are empty, meaning empty of permanence. This means we can change any one of them or all of them together. This allows us to interrupt the flow by which we create our Self, our Ego, and reestablish our Selves as more peaceful beings.

But it is not all as simple as this linear model implies. All five are interrelated. For example, contact and feeling require consciousness, consciousness requires a karmic narrative, and so on. Rather than try to explain every variant, we present here a variety of different visualizations for you to consider:

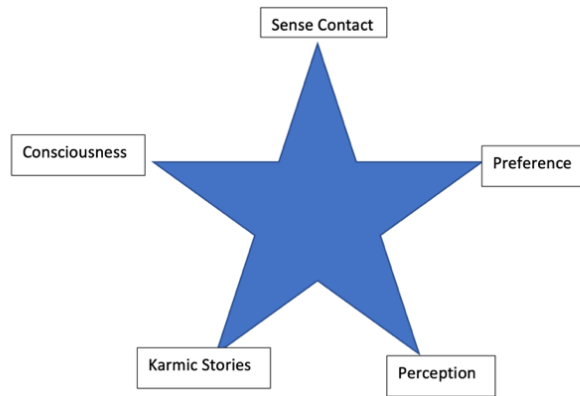
Here we see how each leads to the next in a circular pattern Any one of the five could be used as the starting point, though sense contact is traditionally the starting point.



Here we see how we could model the aggregates so that all arise from consciousness. This requires a deep understanding of our *alaya* and *manas* consciousnesses to be fully understood.



Here we see how each is interrelated with all the others through the image of a five-pointed star, each either directly or indirectly connected to the others.



**Finally and summarily**, here `s what we know: all five aggregates together is a metaphor or schema for how we create our Self, our psychophysical Self.

- (1) Starting with a sense contact, which we know is empty—what we see, hear...etc., we know it is empty because we only see, for example, what our eyes can make contact with, which is a tiny bit of the light spectrum. And we all see differently depending on our karmic needs and interest of the moment, and the amount and condition of our cones and rods.  
Further, our eyes are made of parts: optic nerve, cornea, pupil, iris, etc., which is why they fall under *rupa* (*rupa* being the Sanskrit word for material form). And, as we know from our studies and practice, anything that is composed of parts is by its very nature empty. *Mutatis mutandis* for the other five senses.
- (2) We observe in meditation that at the moment of contact, we assign an affinity or an aversion to the contact. But we know that nothing is permanent, so noting has an inherent affinity or aversion. So this second aggregates is false and empty. Nothing has a permanent affect!
- (3) Perception is when the mind evaluates the contact by labeling or naming it, then assigning it a level of meaningfulness. If these two together are intense enough to warrant us creating a narrative to tell us what to do with the contact, we push onward to creating a story, a narrative, that will tell us what to do with the event or phenomena. Again we see that this is empty because it is a combination of (1) and (2) which are both empty.
- (4) The vast majority of our sense perceptions are not perceived. If every sense contact had to be made into a story, we`d be an anxious mess unable to function. So the mind only makes narratives from those contact it deems significant and which fit into this model.  
And being that we can make two different stories, for example, about the same contact,

we know that the narratives are empty. And we have noted that each of the first four aggregates develop pre-cognitively

- (5) At last, the narrative from (4) our karmic narrative story bank (alaya) moves from pre-cognitive to cognitive and our mind becomes aware of the story. We identify and appropriate the story: “I-am-mine” arises. The story seems true and we adopt it as our Self. But we have built the narrative from a collection of previous memories and narratives, all empty, so the narrative cannot be true.

**CONCLUSION** – All of these being empty, then together they are all empty, so there is No Self.