

## **Bhara Sutta** **The Burden of the Five Aggregates**

**BY MAHASI SAYADAW**

**TRANSLATED BY MIN SWE**  
**SECRETARY**

*Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organization*

October, 1980

**EDITED BY YI-LEI WU**  
**WEBMASTER**

*Buddha Sasana Online*

November, 2003

© You may print this book for your own use, but you may not use it for commercial purposes. If you wish to use this for your website, you must include this title page, and copy it to your own website.

### **Editor's Words**

The original translation can be downloaded from our Digital Library section.

I have taken out and translated most of the Pali words into English as well as rendering the sentences for better understanding. This is the abridged version of the original book, and the original book should also be studied extensively if one cannot gain insight from the abridged version.

The editing process of this book is far more beyond done, but hopefully the current version will not obstruct the readers too much on the side of English grammar and the little mixture between "English" and "American" words such as "practise" and "practice."

Yi-Lei Wu

November 29, 2003

---

### Introduction

The Buddha said,

"O bhikkhus! I will tell you about the burden, about the porter who carries the burden, about the act of transportation of the burden and about the laying down of the burden. Hark me well and pay good attention. I shall speak of them now."

The Buddha enjoins the monks to pay good attention to his discourse relating to the burden, the porter, the act of transportation and the laying down of the burden, Buddha's insistence on paying good attention is worthy of note. Nothing avails him who does not listen well. Only those who fix their minds on what is taught can get enlightenment on the knowledge of the Noble Path and its fruition. In prefacing his discourse, his emphasis lies on how to throw down the burden much to one's relief and joy.

When the disciples had pledged themselves to be attentive, the Buddha opened the subject with the following introduction:

"What o bhikkhus, is the burden? Five aggregates of clinging, are the veritable burden."

In our daily life we might have come across stevedores at ports or porters in railway station,

transporting heavy loads from place to place. Some loads are so heavy that cranes have to be employed. A familiar sight in Burma is a worker carrying rice-bags. A strong man can carry it or even keep it on his shoulders for a long time. But this long time is, in point of fact, only a matter of minutes. He cannot keep it for hours, not to say for days. If he were to keep it on his shoulders permanently, he might be crushed to death. But what a relief it is when he throws it down! He now feels glad that at long last the job is over, but this is just an ordinary load that one can carry. What about this burden of the five aggregates of psycho-physical phenomena which we call the body? When we cling to these five aggregates, we have the great burden.

What I would like to tell you is this burden of the aggregates, which is heavier than any other burden that working peoples are daily carrying from place to place. Every living being is occupied with keeping his body fit and well, He has to feed it daily so that it remains healthy. Some have to be mindful of not only keeping the well-being of their bodies, but also that of the bodies of others, and this is not only for a while, but is for the entire span of human life. This is said in relation to the present existence only.

As a matter of fact, we are all carrying the burden of existence through the myriads of the *samsara*, the rounds of rebirths. We cannot lift it off our shoulders even for a while. What then, are the heavy loads of the five aggregates of clinging?

Here is what the Buddha taught:

"What are the five aggregates of clinging? They are elucidated as: the aggregate of clinging to material body; the aggregate of clinging to feeling or sensations; the aggregate of clinging to perception; the aggregate of clinging to volitional activities; the aggregate of clinging to consciousness. O bhikkhus! These are the five burdens."

I have been lecturing repeatedly on these five aggregates of clinging, because in essence, there are only these five aggregates in all the phenomenal existence. I shall, therefore, repeat this sermon here briefly.

*Khandha* means a group or an aggregate. All phenomenas; past, present, and future are grouped into the *five aggregates*. This statement calls for further explanation. When a

phenomenon arises, the body is involved. This body existed in the past, and it is still here at the present. It will continue to exist in the future, and It is within us as well as without. It may be coarse or refined, inferior or superior quality, and proximate or remote. All such distinctions can be grouped into an *aggregate*, and we name the group *aggregate of material body* ;  
the assemblage of the material elements and properties that constitute what we call the body.

When feeling, perception, volitional activities, and consciousness are similarly grouped or classified, they are respectively called *aggregate of feeling*, *aggregate of perception*, *aggregate of volitional activities*, and *aggregate of consciousness* .

But there is one single dhamma which cannot be grouped or classified in the manner specified herein, and it is nibbāna. It is one, and has no past, no present, and no future. It is also limitless

Clinging or grasping is intensified by craving or desire and wrong view or belief. It therefore connotes a high degree of attachment. The *five aggregates of clinging* are so called because they form the objects of such attachment. In the five aggregates, *aggregate of material body* concerns with the body only while the remaining four relate to feeling, perception, volitional activities, and consciousness belong to *aggregate of mind* .

*Clinging* encompasses all attachments to the *five aggregates*. Here in the this *Bhara Sutta*, where we are concerned with the discussion of the "Burden," we shall deal only with things mundane, and exclude things supramundane. Thus we will be omitting the supramundane consciousness, which is developed by practicing the Eightfold Noble Path. Then, both *aggregate of material body* and *aggregate of mind* will be discussed.

In summary,

Upadanakkhandha - heavy burden the five aggregates of clinging

rupakkhandha - aggregate of form	rupakkhandha - aggregate of body
namakkhandha - aggregate of feeling	namakkhandha - aggregate of feeling
saññakkhandha - aggregate of perception	
sankharakkhandha - aggregate of volitional activities	
viññanakkhandha - aggregate of consciousness	

---

### Upadana – Clingings

Upadana means clinging or grasping, and it is manifested in four ways:-

(1) *kamupadana*, clinging to sensual pleasures:

Pleasurable sensations arise when we come into contact with sensuous objects. Because of these sensation, a desire to enjoy them is developed in us, and we get attached to them. Our attachment may relate to sensations aroused within us or sensations prompted from outside. When the male desires the female and vice versa, there is affinity between the sexes. It is an example of strong attachment, and we yearn for the pleasurable sensations which we come into contact at present as well as those which we hope to have contact with in the future. We desire to have what is hard to obtain, and when we have what is not easily obtainable, we cannot part it easily. This is attachment to sensual existence, but our desires do not rest here, they go beyond to the groups of mind and matter. As we cling to them, there develops in us an attachment to corporeal and formless existences. These are also *kamupadana*, clinging to sensuous objects..

(2) *ditthupadana*, clinging to wrong views:

Clinging to wrong views or beliefs is *ditthupadana*. In general, we are attracted to ideologies. Hence it is not unusual for us to become attached to this or that ideology, moderately or intensely. But in this particular case, we are concerned with wrong ideologies or beliefs. There are wrong beliefs about morality and the existence of self or ego. I shall in the first instance, leave aside these two which will be treated separately later on. The belief that there is no *kamma*

, action, whether wholesome or unwholesome, there is no resultant of kamma, and there is no hereafter fall into the category of *clinging to wrong views*

.

(3) *silabbatupadana*, clinging to wrong religious practices:

Clinging to wrong religious practices that do not lead to cessation of the round of rebirths and to realization of nibbāna is *clinging to wrong religious practices*. It means performance of religious rites not consistent with the path of purification. It includes cattle-practices and dog-practices which stem from the belief that by behaving like cattle and dogs, one gains salvation from suffering. Other similar beliefs include worshipping animals such as cattles and dogs, devas, sakkas, brahmas, or powerful lords and masters with a view to gain liberation from human miseries. The belief that all sins will be expiated if one bathes in the Ganges or makes sacrifice of animals is another example of wrong religious practices. To put it briefly, all religious rites and practices where the Noble Eightfold Path is absent cannot be regarded as wholesome deeds that lead to the cessation of suffering.

(4) *attavadupadana*, clinging to the doctrine of self or ego:

Clinging to the idea of self is *attavadupadana*. There are many theories about the origin of life. Some relate to the belief that a piece of living matter resides in the body, and one exists when that matter is living, but one's existence ceases at the moment it dies. This way of thinking is *clinging to the doctrine of self or ego*,

which means that existence terminates completely with death, and it is called *nihilism*

. Another ideology is

*sassataditthi*

where

*atta*

, self or ego, is presumed to be indestructible, and is therefore eternal. Since at its death it transfers itself into another body, it is called

*eternalism*

.

In the final analysis, the four kinds of clings originated from desire or craving and wrong view or wrong belief. *Clinging to sensual pleasures* belongs to *craving* while the remaining three *clinging* belong to

*wrong views*

. The former is based on sensuous objects while the latter is on wrong thinking.

---

### Carrying the Burden

This body is a heavy burden. Serving it means carrying the heavy burden. When we feed and clothe it, we are carrying the burden. This also means that we are servants to aggregate of material body. Having fed and clothed the body we must also see to it that it is sound and happy both in the physical and psychological sense. This is also serving aggregate of feeling. Again we must see that this body experiences good sights and sounds. This is concerned with consciousness. Therefore we are serving the aggregate of consciousness.

These three burdens are quite obvious. The aggregate of material body says: "Feed me well. Give me what I like to eat; if not, I shall make myself ill or weak. Or, worst still, I shall make myself die!" Then we shall have to try to please it.

Then aggregate of feeling also says: "Give me pleasurable sensations; if not, I shall make myself painful or regretful. Or worst still, I shall make myself die!" Then we shall have to hanker after pleasurable sensations to serve its needs.

Then aggregate of perception also say: "Give me good sights. Give me good sounds. I want pleasant sense-objects. Find them for me; if not, I shall make myself unhappy and frightful. Eventually I shall make myself die!" Then we shall have to do its biddings.

It is as if all these three aggregates are perpetually threatening us so we cannot help complying with their demands, and this compliance is a great burden on us.

The aggregate of volitional activities is also another burden. Life demands that we satisfy our daily needs and desires, and for that satisfaction we have to be active. We must be working all the time. This round of human activities gets encouragement from our volition prompted by desire. These activities make threatening demands on us daily, indicating that if they are not met, trouble and even death would ensue. When human desires remained unfulfilled, they resort to crime.

How heavy the burden of the aggregate of volitional activities rests upon us! It is because we cannot carry this load well upon our shoulders that we get demoralized into committing sin that brings shame upon us. Criminal offences are committed mostly because we cannot carry the burden of the aggregate of volitional activities well. When criminals die, they may be consigned to the netherworld, and they may be reborn as *petas* (ghosts) or animals. Even when they are reborn as human beings, their evil actions will follow in their wake and punish them. They may be short-lived, oppressed with disease all the time, face poverty and starvation, friendless, and always living in danger or in troublous surroundings.

The aggregate of perception is also a great burden because it is with perception that you train your faculties like memory to be able to retain knowledge and wisdom which can discern good from bad, and reject from your mind unwholesome things produced by unpleasant sense-objects. If the demands of the mind for pleasant sense-objects are not met, it will take up only evil, which does nobody any good. Regrets and anxieties arise because we cannot shoulder the burden of the aggregate of perception well.

For all these reasons, the Buddha declared the five aggregates of clinging a heavy burden. We carry the burden of our aggregates not for a time, not for a minute, not for an hour, not for a day, not for a year, not for one life, not for one world, and not for one aeon. We carry the burden from the beginning of the *samsara*, round of rebirths, but it is infinite. It has no beginning, and there is no way of knowing when it will end. Its finality can be reached only with the extermination of *kilesa*

, defilements of the mind, as we get to the stage of the

*arahatta magga*

, the path of the Noble Ones. Even

*arahats*

have to tolerate this burden before they attain nibbāna. The

*arahats*

, therefore, used to contemplate thus:- "For how long shall we carry this burden of the five aggregates which give rise to suffering?" Even an

*arahat*



has to tend to the well-being of his aggregates. To feed it he has to go round for alms. He has to take a bath to cleanse it. He has to excrete for its inner cleanliness. He has to take care of its health by daily adopting the four postures, of walking, sitting, standing, and lying down. He has to sleep regularly for its recuperation. Such are the loads that weigh him down.

Ordinary individuals or worldlings are obsessed with craving, and therefore they consider the five aggregates of psychophysical phenomena not burdensome; to them the burden is light. When we say it is heavy they might consider that we are vilifying because they think that aggregates give them enjoyment of life. There are pleasant sights to see, mellifluous sounds to hear, delicious food to taste, fragrant perfumes to smell, and pleasurable body-touch to experience. There are also good things to know.

Under the influence of *craving*, life is considered unblameworthy. Being delighted with the agreeable sense-objects, one feels that one's burden is light. For example, a man loves his wife very much. Neighbours, however, have noticed certain faults in her, but the husband is blind to them. As far as he knows about her, she has been always sweet to him. Her behaviour is beyond reproach. So he does not believe what others say about her faults. In the same way one who has a craving for one's *aggregates* cannot easily accept the criticism that it is burdensome.

---

### Who Carries the Burden

Only when a man gets old, when he is unable to move about as he would like to, unable to relish his food as much as he would like to, unable to get sleep as much as he needs it, and unable to satisfy his own desires as much as he wishes, he becomes convinced that the burden of his aggregates is indeed heavy. When he falls sick, his conviction grows and when he and his companions encounter all sorts of trials and tribulations, his realization of the heavy burden becomes clearer.

An *arahat* has eliminated desire or craving so it is no longer necessary for him to contemplate on the burden. Knowledge about it comes to him naturally. Let me revert to the story of the man very much in love with his wife. At first he thought that his wife was blameless, then he discovered her infidelity and her plot against his life. When he realized this situation, he need not to be warned by others of the dangers that would befall him. In much the same way an *arahat* needs nobody's warning about the heaviness of the burden he is carrying. He only needs to think about how long he will have to carry it. The load that a porter carries is no doubt very

heavy, but he carries it only for a while. As soon as he feels that it will break his back, he at once throws it down and gets relieved. But the burden of our

*khandha*

rides on our back throughout our lives, nay, throughout the

*samsara*,

rounds of rebirth

.

It gets off our shoulders only when we attain arahatship having exterminated all

*defilements*

in us, and even then only after reaching nibbāna.

Buddha, therefore, said that the heaviest burden is the burden of the five aggregates of clinging

.

### WHO CARRIES THE BURDEN?

The Buddha taught,

"O bhikkhus! Who is carrying the burden? He goes by the name of Tissa or Datta, etc. He belongs to the line of Kanhayana or Vacchayana, etc."

It means that the porter is a individual, assuming the name of Tissa or Datta, being a descendent of Kanhayana or Vacchayana family. What the Teacher meant is all beings, including laymen and even ghosts. For they are all carrying the burden of their aggregates. In ordinary parlance, all individuals are carrying the burden, as it has been postulated that the five aggregates are the burden, and the individual is the porter. The question arises as to whether they are distinct from each other or not. Men who believe in self infer that as Buddha recognizes individual, being, and self, individual is one thing and the five aggregates are another.

This inference merely reveals the character of their attachment to self. Buddha's teaching about non-self, is as clear as day light. If Buddha's philosophy is one of self, his teaching will not be different from those that were current at his time, in which there would be no necessity for Buddhism to arise. Outside the realm of Buddhist teaching there was the belief that the five aggregates constitute *self*. Another belief, however, asserts that the five aggregates are not *self*, but

*self*

exists as a material entity separately elsewhere. Buddhism, however, denies the existence of

*self*

irrespective of whether it is separate and distinct from the five aggregates or not. But in accordance with common custom and usage Buddha used the word individual or being.

There were also occasions when he used the grammatical connotations of myself and others to distinguish one from the other. For instance, in the saying, 'atta hi attano nmtho; ko hi paro natho' (I am my own saviour; there is no other who is my saviour), *I* does not mean the philosophical concept of self, but simply the pronominal "I." There is also another instance of the use of *I* as a personal pronoun in such a saying as 'attanam eva pathamam patirupe nivesaye' (Let him first establish himself in what is right).

Misconceptions arise following the grammatical connotations; and hence, the wrong views. This is shown in *Katha Vatthu* and in the *Anuradha Sutta* in *Khandhavagga Samyutta* Pali Text.

"Anuradha! What do you think: is body a being?"

"body is not a being, Sir."

"Is feeling a being? Is perception a being? Are volitional activities a being? Is consciousness a being?"

"No, Sir. They are not beings."

This catechism shows that there is none whom we can call an individual or a being whether in relation to his five aggregates or not. In the Sutta, Buddha declared that his teaching is concerned with suffering, and liberation from suffering caused by the five aggregates, and he did not preach the eternal existence of *individual*, *being*, or *self*.

### VAJIRAS REPLIES TO MARA'S QUESTIONS

Mara asked: "Who creates beings? Where is the Creator? Where does the creature arise? Where does he vanish?"

To these questions Vajira Thera, the female arahat, replied as followings:-

What, Mara, do you think, is a being? What do you think is wrong view, is it not? What is generally thought a being is but a heap of aggregates in a state of flux.

You cannot find the being in the five aggregates. I shall give you an example. When the wheels, axles and other parts are assembled, the assemblage becomes known by the words, chariot. In the same way when the five constituents of material body, feeling, perception, volitional activities, and consciousness are grouped together, the group comes to be named a being.

Indeed, there is no being but suffering that comes into being, that continues to establish itself as a being and passes away. Nothing but suffering exists; nothing but suffering passes away.

---

### Individual and Khanda

When we use the expression that someone comes into being, the someone referred to is not the individual, but the suffering inherent in the five aggregates. What has been established as someone is not the individual but a load of suffering. And in the same way what has passed away is also a load of suffering that is inherent in the aggregates. So when, in this *Bhara Sutta*, it is said that the porter who carries the burden is the individual, the statement merely conforms to common usage. By the term, individual, is meant the five aggregates. But it does not mean to say that there is an individual beyond the five aggregates.

#### INDIVIDUAL IS JUST A NAME

'Individual' is used just for terminological purposes. It is but a name. To make things understandable we have to fall back upon the use of things made known. If we say that the burden of this aggregate is born from the aggregate, it would be too abstract, and few would understand the meaning it conveys.

#### ULTIMATE AND MUNDANE SUBJECTS

There are two methods of instruction in Buddha's teachings, namely, the *ultimate teaching* and

the

*mundane teaching.*

The former being concerned with abstract knowledge while the latter with ordinary or conventional knowledge appealing to perception by which objects are known by their names. When we discuss about impermanence, suffering, truth, establishment of mindfulness, and sense-spheres, we are concerned with ultimate subjects. When we talk about men, women, devas, brahmins, etc., we are concerned with everyday subjects that one mentions by name.

There are people who can see the light of the dhamma by mundane means of instruction as well as those who get enlightened by ultimate means. A professor who knows many languages explains things to his English Pupils in English, Indian pupils in Hindi and Myanmar pupils in Myanmar. Buddha taught in much the same way employing either of the two methods I have mentioned. There are eight reasons why Buddha used names in common usage and taught in the mundane way, namely,

(1) to explain shame and fear which act as deterrents to sin

When we say that the aggregates are ashamed or frightened, the meaning of the term may not be understood; but when we say that the girl got ashamed or frightened, everyone will understand what the statement means. Therefore when Buddha wanted to emphasise the development of the sense of shame or fear as deterrents to sinning, he used common parlance.

(2) to show that individuals have only kamma as their belonging

When we say the aggregates have only their kamma as their possession, the meaning of the statement may be ambiguous. But when we say that individuals commit good or evil deeds which result in good or evil kammās, and that therefore, these kammās are their own possession, the individual kamma can be understood. When kamma is to be expounded Buddha used names in current speech.

(3) to describe the outstanding deeds of individuals.

When we say that aggregates build houses or monasteries, the meaning will not be clear. So when we speak of Anathapinika we say that he built the Jetavana Monastery, mentioning him by name. Then the meaning will be clearly understood. Hence the use of individual names.

(4) to explain the uninterrupted and irredeemable nature of the worst type of kamma

When we say that the aggregates kill their parents, no one will be able to understand what it means. But everybody will understand us when we say that the son killed his mother or that King Ajatasattu killed his father, bimbisara. Evil karmas at once seize the matricides and patricides the moment they die. And this work of karma is said to be irredeemable in nature as the worst type of evil kamma known as *anantariya* and it allows no pause for rest. In an explanation of this kind, Buddha used common language. Ajatasattu was seized by the heavy kamma because he killed his father. So although he had had the opportunity to hear Buddha preach, he failed to get illumined in the dhamma. Killing his father acted as an impediment to the realization of the Path, and so he is regarded as a *maggantaraya*, danger to the Path. After his death he went straight for the netherworld to suffer in Lohakumbhi hell, losing the opportunity to be raised to heaven. Therefore, he is also regarded as

*sagfantaraya*

, danger to the world of devas.

(5) to encourage the exercise of Brahmavihara, perfect goodwill towards all beings

When we say that aggregates send their good wishes to other aggregates for their long life and happiness one may not understand what it means. So we say monks and laymen wish other monks and laymen happiness and liberation from human miseries, Buddha preached his disciples about the practice of Brahmachariya, exercise of the qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, goodwill and equanimity. Establishment in this exercise is known as Brahmavihara. When Buddha wanted to expound this doctrine he used the mundane teaching. Here, those who do not know Buddha's methodology in teaching the dhamma conceived that supramundane teaching is better and therefore, send their good wishes not to the individual, but to the aggregates. It must be remembered that in practicing Brahmachariya, not only the generic term all beings is used but also the specific term all men, all women, etc., is used. In sending love and kindness regard to others one has to direct his mind or attention to recipients as individuals, and not to their mind and matter. Mind and matter being abstraction, they would present themselves like bricks and stones; and if that be so, what boots it to send one's love and regards to inanimate objects? It is, therefore, commonplace that when you are practicing Brahmachariya, you must recognize the individuality of those on whom your mind dwells.

(6) to reveal the nature of supernormal faculty of remembering the past lives of oneself and others

If we say that our aggregates can remember their past, no one will be able to understand what that means. So we say Buddha remembered this, or the arahat remembered that. When, therefore, Buddha wanted to say something about the remembrance of things past exercising his supernormal faculty, as it is called, he used the mundane teaching.

(7) to explain purity of gifts

If we say we make our offerings to the aggregates, it will be ambiguous. One aggregate gives food to another aggregate. One aggregate gives robes to another khandha. How can aggregates give and how can they receive them? Which group of matter can promote merits of giving away, and which group demerits? Which group of matter is wholesome and which unwholesome? If one links to abstracts, confusions would surely arise. Buddha, therefore, referred to the giver and the recipient as individuals.

(8) to abide by current speech

Now I come to the eighth reason why Buddha taught mundane teaching. Who could have realized more than Buddha that all existences are the phenomena of nama and rupa arising and passing away and that all conditioned things are in a state of flux? On appropriate occasions he taught them so. But he never rejected common usage. There are terms like mother, father, son, daughter, man, woman, god, monk, etc. These terms are used in everyday speech; and Buddha spoke the language of the people current in his time.

---

### Purity of Gifts

Incidentally let me tell you about *dakkinavisuddhi*, purity of gifts. There are four kinds of such purity, as follows:-

(a) When a person practicing morality gives alms to one not practicing it, the giver earns merit. The gift is pure.

(b) When a person not practicing morality gives alms to one practices it, the gift remains pure from the point of view of the recipient. The giver, therefore, earns merit all the same; and the merit is all the more great.

(c) When both the giver and the recipient of the gift are immoral, the gift is impure; and the act of giving is to no avail. Even when the giver shares his merits to the petas, the latter cannot receive them and will not be released from the world of petas.

(d) When both the giver and the recipient of gifts are pure in morality, the gifts will also be pure, and merits accruing from such giving will earn the highest merit.

---

### Short Summary

All mundane teaching is in conventional language. When we say that one is an individual, a being, a woman, or a man, we are being realistic, for all mankind has accepted the descriptions given. Truth ordained by general consensus of opinion is *samutisacca*. In other words it is truth accepted by conventional language of mankind, and so it is no falsehood.

Not desiring to abandon convention, the Buddha, in his *Bhara Sutta*, made references to the porter as an individual. To sum up, the heavy burden is the five aggregates, which we regard as "I" or "Mine" and the one who carries it is the individual who is made up of the five aggregates. But be it noted that the five aggregates cannot be conceived as a separate entity from the individual. This has been extensively explained before. Some may not agree with the proposition that the five aggregates are both the burden and the porter. In that case., please regard the burden as the five aggregates which desire happiness and wellbeing and the porter as the five aggregates which are actually belabouring for the realization of that happiness and well-being.



Now that the burden and the porter have become recognizable, the only thing that remains to be considered is how to discard it. That will be the subject of my next lecture. Now that the time is up, I must close. May those who have given their respectful attention to the discourse relating to the *Bhara Sutta* be able to develop a sense of repugnance towards the five aggregates which oppress us as a heavy load of suffering, and to note the phenomena of the five aggregates arising and passing away at the six sense-doors, and eventually, by such noting or vipassana practice, to reach nibbāna where the burden can be thrown away.

---

### Cause of Burden

Now, why do people carry this burden knowing it to be very heavy? Who prompts them to carry it? A serious consideration is enough to show you that no one is prompting anybody to carry it. It is he himself who is carrying it at his own sweet will. Those who believe in creation might say that God makes him carry it. If that be so, the poor, the diseased, the maimed, the blind, the deaf, and the oppressed would have ample reasons to quarrel with the creator. According to Buddha's teaching no one ever imposed the burden on us. It is the individual himself who accepts it. The Buddha said:

"O bhikkhus! What is it that makes us carry the burden? Craving makes us carry the burden."

### CRAVING IS HUNGRY FOR SENSE-OBJECTS

Craving is very much like hunger and thirst. It yearns for pleasant, wholesome and beautiful objects. It is never satiated with them. It is always hungry for them. Having seen a pleasurable thing, it desires to see another. It likes to hear sweet music, enjoy fragrant smell, enjoy good taste, feel pleasant touch, and it wants to think or imagine about good subjects. It never gets satisfied with all the objects that appeal to the senses. It is always in great hunger which is all-consuming.

When the mind dwells on a pleasant object, it develops desire to possess it. This desire accepts the burden of the five aggregates which we call the body. Attachment to sense-objects is *upada*

*na* (clinging) which strives for the fulfillment of desire. This produces good and evil actions. When one is near death these actions appear as

*kamma nimittas*

, signs associated with good or evil actions done in the past, which point up to a destiny guided by such actions. As the individuals cling to these signs, a new aggregate arises after the death by dint of that clinging. It may be seen that all the six senses of seeing, hearing, tasting,

smelling, touching, and thinking play their parts in the creation of desire or attachment. The development of desire is tantamounts to the acceptance of the burden of the body. Because of desire, attachment is motivated and we describe this as

*upadana kamma*

, which gives rise to new aggregates. Hence we say that craving creates a new existence after the death of the man.

Craving gets absorbed into sense-objects with which it comes into contact without discrimination like the dyeing chemicals that hold fast on to the materials to be dyed. It attaches itself to them whether such attachment is proper in order or not. It takes a fancy to everything it sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches, and thinks about. So it is described in the scriptures as taking delight in objects. It never feels weary with enjoyment. From the point of view of a man in higher station in life, it may be presumed that superior beings will have no inclination for conditions of life of inferior beings. They may feel bored or repugnant under such conditions. But when they actually get debased they can find enjoyment in their new lives. Viewing from this plane of human existence, one would have thought that the bodies of worms or snakes are repulsive or abhorrent. The very thought that one would be reborn out of the womb of a worm or a snake is disgusting. But when, as his kamma asserts itself, an individual is born a worm or a snake, and he finds life in the animal kingdom highly enjoyable. That is the work of craving, which finds joy and pleasure wherever it is posted. So Buddha has also described it as a disposition which revels in whatever sense-objects wherever they exist.

### THREEFOLD TANHA

Craving is threefold, namely, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for sensual pleasures associated with the view of eternalism, and craving for sensual pleasures associated with the view of nihilism. These cravings receive and accept the body called the aggregates.

---

### Craving for Sensual Pleasures

Sensual objects may originate in ourselves or in others. When things of joy and beauty attract us, we must at once recognize that craving for those things has developed in us. Beautiful sense-objects do not merely mean the primary objects of joy and beauty. When we refer to a beautiful girl or a handsome boy, we are not referring only to the girl or the boy who possesses good looks, but also the accessories of beautification such as dress etc. So when we say craving has been developed, we do not mean that it is only for sights and sounds that are enjoyable, but also the accessories that accompany them.

Consider the same manner when we speak of craving for good smell, delicious taste, pleasurable touch and fanciful mental image. When we desire to become human beings, devas, men, women, etc., our desires relate to sensual pleasures that can be expected from sense-objects that appear at the six sense-doors. The development of craving is due to ignorance or delusion, which covers up the true nature of the phenomena and reveals all the opposite of truth, thus contributing to wrong thinking.

As it covers up the truth, deceit comes up in a favourable light. In this way it reveals impermanence as permanence, unsatisfactoriness as satisfactoriness and unsubstantiality as substantiality. Hence non-self, is mistaken as self. In like manner unwholesomeness and ugliness are mistaken for wholesomeness and beauty. When delusion invokes craving, grasping or attachment arises; and because of this attachment we try our very best to fulfil our desires; and as we make great efforts in the fulfillment of our desires, action and volitional activities are brought into play. They create new aggregates. So, after one life we go over to another in a new aggregates, all by dint of craving prompted by delusion. Finally we are left with the burden of the aggregates to carry.

We always want the best, but we rarely get it. An individual longs to become a man or a divinity; but he may, instead of becoming what he wants to become, have to go down to the four netherworlds or to the world of ghosts by force of kamma. Or he may be reborn as an animal; he may become a buffalo, an ox, a chicken, or a worm. Life is like staking in a lottery. Everybody stakes his money in the lottery, and hopes to win the big prize, but only the luckiest gets it. Others have to be content with second or third prize. Most of them go away with the least prizes. The most unfortunate fellow draws only blanks and gets nothing; not everybody gets the first prize. In the same way, not everybody can become a man or a divinity.

Those who possess good kamma may be reborn in those higher planes of existence, but good kamma can be achieved only through the practice of charitableness, morality, and concentration. Those who fail to perform these merits, cannot gain entrance into this human or divine world, and they are likely to be consigned to the nether, animal, or ghostly world. All new aggregates have their genesis in craving, which finds enjoyment in pleasant objects; and it is, therefore, said to be the receiver or acceptor of the burden.

Every time we accept a desirable sense-object, we are accepting the heavy burden of the aggregates. Having accepted it, we have to carry it and serve it for forty, fifty, or a hundred years of our lives amidst untold hardship and misery. Had we realized this before, we would have looked upon attachment to our desired objects with abhorrence. In fact we would be more than horrified had we known beforehand that because of this attachment we would be reborn

into the animal world to bear the burden of animal aggregates, or worst still, into the ghostly world to bear the burden of ghost aggregates. The ghosts are those who suffer because of their evil deeds which they commit with the encouragement given by their desires. Had we known beforehand that such desires would ultimately lead us to hell we would be all the more frightened.

---

### Craving for Existence

Having dealt with *craving for sensual pleasures*, I now come to *craving for existence*. There are two wrong views held by worldlings about life. One is called eternalistic view of existence, and the other is nihilistic view of existence. Craving for existence arises conjointly with the eternalistic view which assumes that pleasures are indestructible since living substance knows no death continuing through-out eternity. The physical part of the body may become decayed or destroyed, but the spiritual part of it lives as it migrates from one body to the other and gives rise to a new entity. The universe may get destroyed, but the spirit or living substance lives on. It is permanent, and it is eternal.

Outside the teaching of Buddhism this view is the most popular. Those who hold this view presume that when a man dies, he is raised to heaven where he lives eternally, or alternately, he is consigned to hell, also eternally, according to the will of God. Others would like to believe that one's spirit migrates from one body to another and renews itself according to the working of one's kamma.

Another belief is that life is predetermined and fixed, and it goes on eternally according to that predetermination. Briefly stated, a belief in eternity of the substance of life is eternalism. Under such a notion, life is like a bird that hops from tree to tree as the old tree falls into decay. When the physical body dies, the living matter moves unto another new body. Under the influence of *craving for sensual pleasures*

supported by the idea of eternity, an individual is gratified with the thought that self abides by him permanently. He feels that what now exists is himself, confident that what he is now enjoying can also be enjoyed in his future lives. Hence his attachment to all what he sees, hears, tastes, smells, touches and thinks grows stronger throughout existence. He not only delights in sense-objects which he experiences in the present life, but also in those which he hopes to experience hereafter. He wants to enjoy life now and desires to continue enjoying it in his next existence. Having led a happy life as a human being, he goes even further than that, and hopes for happiness as a divinity.

Thus grows the desire. So some would like to be males in all their existences, and others aspire to be females. All such longings are the work of *craving for sensual pleasures*. Yearning for the sense-objects to which one has become attached means acceptance of the burden of the *five aggregates*.

---

### Craving for Non-Existence

Briefly put, *nihilism* is a belief in no hereafter. Everything perishes after death. It was the doctrine preached by Ajita who flourished during Buddha's time. It runs thus:

An individual is made up of primary elements of earth, water, fire, and air. When he dies, the earth-element goes into the mass of the earth; the water element flows into the mass of water; the fire element changes into heat; the air element flows into the mass of air. All organs of the senses ... of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and thinking ... disappear into space. When an individual, be he a wise man or a fool, dies, his body is destroyed and annihilated. Nothing is left after death.

While residing in the living body, the earth element manifests itself in the form of hardness or softness, but when the body dies, it merges itself with the earth. In other words, the earth element in the dead body turns into the material earth from which trees and plants grow. In like manner, water element in the dead body assumes wetness and fluidity of the material water. The nihilists of the Ajita school do not recognize the existence of consciousness. All the faculties of seeing, hearing, etc., are conditioned by matter. So when they referred to these faculties they used the term *organ of sense*. So, when a man dies, his matter is annihilated, and his faculties of the senses fritter away in space. No matter who dies, whether a wise man or a fool, his existence is "cut off" or snuffed out.

When a fool dies, there will be no rebirth and so he needs not to have any qualms of remorse for his evil deeds, just as the wise man is unaffected by his wholesome deeds. This, briefly, is the way of thinking of Ajita. His doctrine appeals to those who revel in committing evil, finding it irksome to do good. As it postulates that there is no life after death, it may be argued that there is life before death. If that is the case, it may further be asked: "What is life before death?" The answer according to the line of reasoning of Ajita and his ilk, would be the living self or being. It suggests that, despite its views on the four primary elements, *self* or *being* exists. This is attachment to self pure and simple.

Those who hold nihilistic view stipulate that one should not waste time to do meritorious deeds for forthcoming existences (which will not be forthcoming in their views), but occupy oneself with full enjoyment of the present existence (i.e. the only existence one will have according to them). Craving arising out of this view of non-existence is *craving for non-existence* which promotes enjoyment of pleasures while they last since everything perishes after death. Naturally this ideology has a great appeal to those who delight in evil, shrinking from the practice of morality and other meritorious ways of life. Since nothing happens after death, there is no necessity to acquire merit. Those getting enamoured of this view do not like the idea that life is being constantly renewed and that the effects of good or bad kamma follow them in their trail. If no new life occurs after death, all their evil actions will come to an end with the end of their existence, and they will not be held responsible for any consequences (i.e. good or bad deeds). In fact, evil deeds done by them will be expunged when they pass away, and emerge from them as innocent as a lamb;

### *Sensualism*

often finds satisfaction in the idea of total annihilation.

A man possessed by it is always eager to enjoy all the pleasures of life without any restraint in the commitment of sins. This acceptance of pleasures in the present existence is tantamount to the acceptance of the *aggregates* that will arise in the next existence. Evil actions that accumulate in this life are *akusala kammass* in which the dying man get attached. By the dint of these kammass, new *aggregate*

will arise. As long as craving persists, new existence is inevitable notwithstanding the nihilistic view. It is like when medical advice says that the patient should not take any food unsuitable to his health, but the patient cannot restrain himself and takes what has been forbidden. The result will be that his condition worsens, and he might even die. The man afflicted with *nihilism* is like that patient.

Although he believes in no hereafter, his craving for pleasurable objects are so intense such that he "becomes" again, despite what his philosophy says. His new existence will hardly serve him in good stead because he has never done any meritorious deeds before. Every evil action produces evil result. (It may even be put forward that to every evil action there is an opposite evil reaction). His philosophy has all along been the fulfillment of selfish desires regardless of adverse consequences to others. Let others die so that he may live, so he considers. He has no qualms of remorse for his actions that harm others. As he develops only bad kammass in this way, he will have nothing to hope for except inferior and miserable existences throughout the future of this samsara.

To repeat, *craving for non-existence* believes that there is no hereafter. One who is afflicted with this kind of craving indulges in pleasures without restraint in, what he considers as the happy notion that as all things perish with death, one will not have to answer for actions that are good or bad during his life-time.

---

### Throw Down the Burden

Let me say again what has been put forward earlier.

What is the heavy burden? *The five aggregates* are the heavy burden.

Who carries the heavy burden? The individual made up of *the five aggregates* carries the heavy burden.

Who accepts the heavy burden for transportation? *Craving* accepts the heavy burden for transportation.

### THROWING DOWN THE BURDEN

Now I shall come to the subject of how to throw down this heavy burden, which is the most important part of this discourse. Regarding throwing down the burden, the Buddha said,

"O bhikkhus! What does throwing down the burden mean? It means completely annihilating, renouncing, abandoning, releasing, and disengaging desire."

As soon as *craving* is rejected, the burden will fall off one's shoulders. The rejection can be done through the application of knowledge relating to insight-meditation and to realize the Noble Path.

*Craving* will recede from such knowledge as darkness extinguished, and there will be no cause for the *aggregates* to arise. *Arahatta* -*maggā*

the Path of the Worthy Ones, brings about the complete annihilation of all forms of cravings. At

the stage of

*anagami-magga*

, the Path of the Never-Returner, all cravings for sensual pleasures of lust (

*Kamaraga*

) is extinguished.

Because of the absence of that kind of craving, an *anagami* is released from *kamma-bhava*, active process of becoming, and so he will not be reborn either as a human being or a divinity to shoulder the burden of the five aggregates of man or

*deva*

.

*Sakadagami-magga*

, the Path of the Once-returner, can also exterminate lust completely. So he can also throw down the burden finally after two existences.

At the stage of *sotapatti-magga*, the Path of the Stream-winner, self-illusion and doubt become extinguished. These two fetters are much the same as craving. Once these fetters are removed there will be no opportunity for

netherworld to arise, so a

*sotapanna*

will never suffer in hell. He is prepared to throw down the burden after seven existences.

In order to illustrate the advantages gained by a *sotapanna* who can avoid suffering born out of the five aggregates, the Buddha employed the metaphor of sand. He collected a quantity of sand and placed on his fingernail, and showed it to the monks, asking: "Which is greater in quantity .... sands in my finger-nail or sands of the earth?" On being replied by the monks that the sands in his fingernail are infinitesimal compared to the sands of this earth, he admonished the monks that the suffering arising out of "becoming" before a meditator attains the state of *sotapanna*

is uncountable like sands of the earth, and after the attainment of the Path and its fruition, the suffering that would remain for his last seven existences would be infinitesimal compared to what he had encountered before. He, therefore, urged his disciples to strive for the inward realization of the Four Noble Truths.

"If craving is uprooted, desire will be eliminated. When one throws down the old burden, no new burden can be imposed on him. Then nibbanic peace will be achieved."



## **The Burden of the Five Aggregates**

Sunday, 15 March 2009 23:27

---

When craving, together with delusion, is eliminated, desire will completely disappear. When the old body is rejected, the burden of carrying a new body will be removed. Then miseries cease, and peace is established.