According to Buddhism, life is nothing but a compound of five aggregates (pañcakkhandha) – form, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. None of these aggregates can exist by itself and they are inseparable.

The individual suffers primarily from the transitoriness of aggregates because of the feeling of “I AM”. It is this deluded feeling which makes the compound of aggregates the bearer of suffering.

**Matter or Form** **(Rūpa)**

* Matter consists of the combination of the four great elements of solidity, fluidity, motion and heat.
* It includes not only our own bodies but also the material objects that surround us – the earth, the trees, the buildings, and the objects of everyday life.
* Specifically the five physical sense organs and the corresponding material objects of those sense organs:

1. The eyes and physical objects.
2. The ears and audible objects.
3. The nose and olfactory objects.
4. The tongue and objects of taste.
5. The skin and tangible objects.

However, physical elements by themselves are not enough to produce experience. Only when the eyes, a visible object and consciousness come together is the experience of a visible object produced. Consciousness is therefore an indispensable element in the production of experience.

**Mind (Nama)**

* In addition to the five physical sense organs, mind is the sixth with ideas as the objects. Similarly, it requires consciousness to be present to unite the mind and its object to produce experience.

* Mind consists of the combination of sensations, perception, volitional activities and consciousness.

1. Feeling or sensation (Vedanā)

It has an emotive element in the form of pleasant, unpleasant, and indifferent.

When an object is been experienced through the six sense organs, that experience – physical and mental feeling and sensations experienced takes on one of these emotive tones.

1. Perception (Saññā)

It has a conceptual element in the form of introducing a definite & determinate idea about the object experienced.

It turns an indefinite experience into an identifiable, recognizable one. It is similar to attaching a name to an object of experience.

It relates to the recognition of objects, both physical and mental, when they come into contact with the six sense organs.

1. Volition or mental formation (Sańkhārā)

It is a conditioned response to the object of experience or habit. It is the impression created by previous actions, the habit energy stored up over the course of countless former lifetimes.

As one of the five aggregates, volition has not only a static value but also a dynamic value because, just as our present are conditioned by past actions, so our responses here and now are motivated and directed in a particular way by volition.

Therefore, volition has a moral dimension. The Buddha defined kamma as “It is volition that I call Kamma. Having willed, one acts through body, speech and mind”

The term volition and mental formation each represents one half of the meaning of the original term:

a) Mental formation represents the half that comes from the past

b) Volition represents the half that functions here and now.

Mental formation and volition work together to determine our responses to the objects of experience, and these responses have moral consequences in the form of wholesome, unwholesome and neutral effects.

1. Consciousness (Viññāņa)

Consciousness is an indispensable element in the production of experience. It is mere awareness of, or mere sensitivity to an object.

**Analysis of Personal Experience**

When the eyes and a visible object come into contact, and consciousness, too, becomes associated with the material factors of experience, visual consciousness arises. This is mere awareness of a visible object, not personal experience.

Personal experience is produced through the functioning of the other three major mental factors of experience – feeling, perception and volition. They turn mere awareness of the object into personal experience.

In our daily activities, we can see how the five aggregates work together to produce personal experience. At this very moment, for instance, there is contact between the eyes and eye object – your eyes and the letters on the page. Your consciousness becomes aware of the letters on the page. Your aggregate of perception identifies the words that are written there. Your aggregate of feeling produces an emotional response – pleasure, displeasure or indifference. Your aggregate of volition responds with a conditioned reaction – sitting at attention, daydreaming or yawning.

Another example, when you walk, your eyes come into contact with a visible object. As you focus on that object, your consciousness becomes aware of a visible object which is as yet indeterminate. Your perception then identifies that visible object as snake. Once that happens, you respond with the feeling of displeasure. Finally, you react to that visible object with volition – running away or grab a stick.

These five aggregates are in constant change. Today we may respond to a particular situation with a feeling of pleasure; tomorrow with displeasure. Now we may perceive an object in a particular way, but later under different circumstances, our perception will change. In semi-darkness, we perceive a rope to be a snake, the moment light falls on that object we perceive it to be a rope.

**Why analyze personal experience in terms of the five aggregates?**

* To create the wisdom of not-self and experience the world that is not constructed on and around the idea of a self.
* To see personal experience in terms of processes and impersonal functions rather than a self and what affects a self. This will create an attitude of equanimity, which will help us overcome the emotional disturbances of hope and fear about the things in the world.
* Once we understand it is an impersonal process, we get rid of the idea of a self. We can regard happiness and pain, praise and blame with equanimity, with even-mindedness.

**References**

**(1) The Tree of Enlightenment by Peter Della Santina**

**(2) Buddhism The Religion and Its Culture by Ananda W.P. Guruge**