Emptiness And The Five Aggregates

The concept of emptiness is at the core of how Buddhism perceives the nature of reality. The Pali word for emptiness is sunnata (soon-yah-tah). Here are some terms that seem to describe this concept:

The term *Sunna* (Sk. *Sunya)* is an adjective meaning void, empty, uninhabited, devoid of reality, insubstantial

phenomena, etc. The term *Sunnata* (Sk. *sunyata)* is a feminine form of an abstract noun, meaning voidness, emptiness, insubstantiality of all phenomena, freedom from lust, ill will and dullness etc. Etymologically the Sanskrit term sunya (pali *sunna)* is a derivative form from *suna* (past participle of *su*) meaning swollen, which is derived from the root,*su*, a weak form of *svi,* sometimes it is written as '*sva*' meaning to swell, to be hollow. The root, *svi* seems to have expressed the idea that something, which looks 'swollen' from the outside, is 'hollow' inside. Our personality is swollen in so far as it is constituted by the five aggregates *(pancakkhandhd),* but it is hollow inside, because it is devoid of acentral self. (downloaded from lib.unipune.ac.in:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/.../1891/08\_chapter%203.pdf?... September 4, 2017)

I find the terms “uninhabited, insubstantial phenomena…” and particularly the suggestion of hollowness…that which looks swollen from the outside but is hollow inside to be quite useful in understanding how this process operates. There is a discourse from the Pali Canon that directly relates to sunnata and the five aggregates. Here is a partial quote from SN 35.85 the Sunna Sutta translated by Thanissaro:

“Then Ven. Ananda went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One, "It is said that the world is empty, the world is empty, lord. In what respect is it said that the world is empty?"

"Insofar as it is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self: Thus it is said, Ananda, that the world is empty. And what is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self? The eye is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. Forms... Eye-consciousness... Eye-contact is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self.

"The ear is empty...

"The nose is empty...

"The tongue is empty...

"The body is empty...

"The intellect is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. Ideas... Intellect-consciousness... Intellect-contact is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. Thus it is said that the world is empty."

The understanding of sunnata as “hollowness” might be useful here, as described above, that is, the sense of self is “swollen” through craving and clinging to the Five Aggregates, but lacking a central, controlling self. What are the Five Aggregates? They are form, feeling, perception, mental conditioners and consciousness. Let’s analyze each of the aggregates to clarify this concept:

**FORM:** This represents the physical world as it appears through the senses, that is, sound, visual stimuli, pressure, temperature, odor, flavors, and so on. These functions are emphasized in the above quote. **Obviously, there can be no self in those phenomena.**

**FEELING:** This represents the feeling tone of the stimulation of the ears, eyes, body sensations, nose and tongue. The feeling tone can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. **There can be no self in that experience either.**

**PERCEPTION:** This represents how the mind creates a distinction, a way of separating a particularly discriminated object from the otherwise indeterminate environment. An example would involve the vibration in the air that stimulates the auditory nerve that is perceived as “a dog barking”. The perception marks the distinguishing characteristics and boundaries of the sound, differentiating the auditory field into barking/the experiential field within which barking operates. When considered that way, **there is no self in this process either.** However, feeling and perception operate in an integrative way whenever a particular stimulus activates one of the “sense doors” described in the sutta above. Feeling and perception stimulate what can be called “search parameters”, that is, memory.

**MENTAL CONDITIONERS:** **This is where the selfing process comes into being.** The mental conditioners represent categories of memory that relate to the stimulation provided by feelings and perceptions. This is where craving and clinging operates in creating a self. The sound mentioned above was perceived as the barking of a dog. That perception creates a “search protocol” that operates to make the sound meaningful. If the person hearing the sound has a cluster of painful memories associated with the sound, a feeling tone of apprehension will develop. This feeling tone will search for other remembered experiences regarding a dog, and will build an aversive and potentially aggressive selfing story from the sound. Alternatively, if the sound is associated with pleasant memories regarding dogs, the feeling tone will orient towards seeking out the dog. Remember, it is just a sound—it could be a recording of a dog barking--but the mind creates assumptions that can be acted on based on the initial perception/feeling process. This is the stage where “the tyranny of I, Me and Mine”, that is, attachment to the view of an autonomous self develops.

Whether we’re investigating aversion or desire, craving and clinging are fundamental forces driving the selfing process. A liberating alternative would involve mindful investigation of potential selfing stories and disregard the desire or fear associated with them. In that case, the sound would be perceived as a dog barking, and the feeling tone would initially be associated with conditioned memory traces. When a person routinely cultivates samadhi/passadhi (stable attention/tranquility), the impulsivity associated with craving will be less potent. This will provide the opportunity to not automatically “buy in” to the associated memory trace. The result emerges more creatively and more adaptability. Additionally, and more importantly from a liberation standpoint, the experience of the dynamic interaction between feeling/perception and craving/clinging would be perceived as an example of nonself, that is, sunnata/emptiness.

**CONSCIOUSNESS:**  Consciousness is the reflective quality that is fundamental to all human functions other than unconsciousness. Consciousness is affected by craving and clinging. Each moment of “selfing” leaves a slight trace of enduring craving and clinging, and this trace, when repeated over time, acts as a biasing filter that supports the action of craving and clinging. It’s like a filter that keeps growing more impactful through repetition. When a person experiences repeated frustration, the aversion associated with that moment-by-moment process seems more and more convincing, often in generalized ways. **The process of selfing occurs as the projections of mental conditioners are reflected in consciousness.**

An example would be road rage. When a person’s selfing process is strongly affected by frustration, the effects add up, like the straws on the mythical camel’s back. While driving in traffic after a day of stressful activities of selfing occur, the minor surge of frustration that develops when someone else’s driving behavior doesn’t match the expectations of the driver, the “last straw”, that is, the accumulated aversion and ill-will that colors the consciousness tips over into outrage, sometimes with disastrous results.

WHAT IS EMPTINESS?

The word emptiness can be problematic. The typical understanding of emptiness is like interstellar space. I prefer to associate it with hollowness, such as the characteristics of an empty cup. A cup can be quite useful in carrying liquids; we think of the cup as empty, but it’s really full--of air! The cup’s form suggests the possibility of being filled, and that capacity keeps the liquid from escaping, which would waste the liquid as far as drinking is concerned.

We can consider the selfing process as a cup, that is, the function of the ego is such that it can be filled with whatever seems useful in a specific situation. Consciousness is the cup, and form is the liquid; what kind of liquid, how it is created, the menu involved, represents feeling, perception and mental formations. Consider soup, which is often sipped from a cup. The soup can be too hot or too cold, too salty or too sweet, and so on. We are free to create what fills the cup, and this creative freedom is emptiness! Emptiness represents the potential for a more flexible adaptation as circumstances warrant. When craving and clinging predominate, the option generation that emptiness offers is compromised, limited by the rigidity of “I, Me and Mine”, that is, ego gratification or defense. Nonattachment loosens the binding function of craving and clinging, which fosters liberation from dukkha, distress and confusion, on a practical and liberational level.