

The Philosophy of Five Khandas (Aggregates) in the Theravāda Buddhism

*Ven. Candima & **Dr. C. Neela Devi (Guide)

*Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Annamalai University,

**Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Annamalai University.

Abstract

The present Article links the conditioned and conditioning disposition of the *khandhas* to a comprehension of dependent origination, a comprehension which in the *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta* leads on to an understanding of the fourfold noble truth. From a practical perspective, to contemplate the conditioned and conditioning disposition of the fivefold *khandha* can be assumed by becoming aware of how any bodily or mental experience depends on, and is affected by, a set of conditions. Since these conditions are not amenable to full personal control, one evidently does not have power over the very foundation of one's own subjective experience. "I" and "mine" turn out to be utterly dependent on what is "other", a predicament which reveals the characteristic of *anattā*. Actually, one who differently understands the nature of *anattā* of the fivefold *khandha* can realize empty of "I" and "mine", similarly, that one who comprehends the natural disposition of empty of "I" and "mine" and so on can, absolutely, attain the *Nibbāna* (bliss).

Keywords: *Khandhas, Anattā, Empirical self, Theory, Nibbāna.*

Introduction

Having overcoming the hindrances with the assistance of the previous contemplation of *dharmas*, one can turn to examine the basic components that make up subjective experience and personality. Such an analytical investigation of subjective personality is the topic of the contemplation of the fivefold aggregate. The instructions for this contemplation are: He knows: 'such is material form, such its arising, such its bereavement; such is feeling, such its arising, such its bereavement; such is cognition, such its arising, such its bereavement; such are volitions, such their arising, such their bereavement; such is consciousness, such its arising, and such its

bereavement. Underlying the above instruction is a two-stage progress in contemplation: clear recognition of the nature of each *khandha*, followed by awareness of its arising and bereavement. In my discussion I will at first attempted to clarify the range of each *khandha*, followed by examining the Buddha's instruction of *anattā* within its historical context, so as to examine the way in which the scheme of the fivefold *khandha* can be, practically, applied to an analysis of subjective experience. After that, I will examine the second phase of practice, concerned with the impermanent and conditioned nature of the aggregates. Two Stages in the consideration of the fivefold aggregate are as under: **(a)** (1) *Rūpa* (material form), (2) *Vedanā* (feeling), (3) *Saññā* (cognition), (4) *Saṅkhāra* (volitions), (5) *Viññāṇa* (consciousness) and **(b)** Knowing the impermanent nature of each *khandha*.

To clearly recognise and understand the fivefold *khandha* is of considerable importance, since in accordance with the *dhammadesanas*, without fully understanding them and developing detachment towards them, freedom from *dukkha* is impossible. Conversely, detachment and dispassion towards these five aspects of subjective personality directly leads to realisation. The discourses and also the verses wrote by awakened *bhikkhus* (monks) and *bhikkhunīs* (nuns) documentation many cases where a penetrative understanding of the true nature of the fivefold *khandha* culminated in full awakening. These instances bring to light the eminent potential of this particular contemplation. The fivefold *khandha* is often qualified in the discourses as the 'five aggregates of clinging' (*pañcupādānakkhandha*). In this context *khandha* is an umbrella word for all likely examples of each group, whether past, or present, or future, internal or external, subtle or gross, inferior or superior, near or far. The qualification 'clinging' (*upādāna*) denotes to desire (*chanda*) and attachment (*taṅhā*) in look upon to these *khandhas*. Such desire and attachment concerning the *khandhas* is the elementary cause for the arising of *dukkha*. The sequence of these five *khandhas* leads from the gross physical body to increasingly subtler mental aspects. The primary of these *khandhas*, material form (*rūpa*), stands for bodily matter, usually defined in the discourses by way of the fourfold elementary quality of matter. A discourse in the *Khandha Saṃyutta* explains that material form (*rūpa*) refers to whatever is affected (*ruppati*) by external conditions such as cold and heat, hunger and thirst, mosquitoes and snakes, emphasizing the subjective experience of '*rūpa*' as a central aspect of this *khandha*.

Next in the sequence of the *khandhas* come feeling (*vedanā*) and cognition (*saññā*), which represent the affective and the cognitive aspects of experience. In the circumstance of the process of perception, cognition (*saññā*) is intimately related to the arising of feeling, both depending on stimulation through the six senses by way of contact (*phassa*). The standard presentations in the discourses relate feeling to the sense-organ, but cognition to the respective sense-object. This documents that feelings are predominantly related to the subjective repercussions of an experience, while cognitions are more concerned with the features of the respective external object. To speak of a ‘cognition’ of an object refers to the act of identifying raw sensory data with the help of concepts or labels, such as when one sees a coloured object and ‘recognises’ it as yellow, red, or white, etc.

Cognition to some extent involves the faculty of memory, which furnishes the conceptual labels used for re-cognition. The fourth *khandha* is the volitions (*saṅkhāra*), representing the cognitive aspect of the mind. These volitions or intentions correspond to the reactive or purposive aspect of the mind, that which reacts to things or their potentiality. The *khandha* (aggregate) of volitions and intentions interrelates with each of the *khandhas* and has a conditioning effect upon each. In the subsequent development of Buddhist philosophy, the meaning of this term expanded until it came to include a wide diversity of mental factors. The fifth *khandha* is consciousness (*viññāna*). Even though, on occasion, the discourses use ‘consciousness’ to represent mind in a general way, in the circumstance of the *khandha* classification it refers to ‘being conscious’ of something by way of the six senses. This act of being conscious is most prominently responsible for supplying an intelligence of personal cohesiveness, for the feeling or conception of a significant ‘I’ behind experience. Consciousness depends on the various features of experience supplied by name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*), just as name-and-form in turn depend on consciousness as their point of reference. This conditional inter-relationship creates the world of experience, with consciousness being aware of phenomena that are being modified and presented to it by way of name-and-form.

To provide a practical illustration of the fivefold *khandha* (aggregates): during the present act of reading, for example, ‘consciousness’ is aware of each word through the physical sense door of the eye. ‘Cognition’ recognises the meanings of each word, while ‘feelings’ are responsible for the affective mood, for whether one feels positive, negative, or neutral about this particular piece

of information. Due to 'volition' one quickly reads on, or stops to consider the present passage in more depth, or even turns to a footnote. The discourses explain the trait features of the fivefold *khandha* with a set of similes, which contrast material form to the flimsy nature of a lump of foam carried away by a river; feelings to the impermanent bubbles that form on the outside of water through rain; cognition to the deceptive nature of illusion a mirage; volitions to the essence-less nature of a plantain tree (since it has no heartwood); and consciousness to the deceptive performance of a magician. This set of similes points to central aspects that need to be understood in regard to each aggregate. In the condition of the body, considering its unappealing and fragile nature corrects mistaken notions of substantiality and attractiveness. Regarding feelings, understanding of their impermanent nature counteracts have a tendency to search for pleasure through feelings.

In observe to attention, awareness of its delude activity uncovers the tendency to plan one's own value judgements onto external phenomena as if these were qualities of the outside substance. With decisions, vision into their unselfish nature corrects the erroneous conception that determination is the appearance of a significant self. Concerning consciousness, understanding its misleading presentation counterbalances the intelligence of cohesion and solidity it tends to offer to what really is a hotchpotch of temporary and conditioned phenomena. Due to the encouragement of ignorance, the fivefold *khandha* is experienced as embodiments of the notion 'I am'. From the un-awakened point of view, the body is where 'I am', feelings are how 'I am', cognitions are what 'I am' (perceiving), volitions are why 'I am' (acting), and consciousness is whereby 'I am' (experiencing). Thus, each *khandha* offers its own provision to enacting the comforting illusion that 'I am'. By laying bare these five aspects of the notion 'I am', the early Buddhist analysis of personality into *khandhas* singles out the constituent parts of the deceptive supposition that an independent and unchanging agent inheres in existence, thereby enabling the arising of insight into the ultimately selfless (*anattā*) nature of all aspects of experience. In order to properly assess the implications of the *khandha* scheme, I will now briefly examine the teaching of *anattā* against the background of the philosophical positions in existence at that time.

Empirical Self and the *khandha* Theory

Even though there is no wish to widely show historical context of the teaching on *anattā*,

empirical self and the *khandha* theory will quite examine here. Actually, the Buddha's penetrating analysis of self does not only provide a philosophical refutation of the soul-theories, but has intriguing aspects of psychological relevance. 'Self', as an independent and permanent entity, is related to notions of mastery and control. Such notions of mastery, permanency, and also of inherent satisfaction to some degree parallel the concepts of 'narcissism' and the 'ideal ego' in modern psychology. These concepts do not refer to articulate philosophical beliefs or ideas, but to unconscious assumptions implicit in one's way of perceiving and reacting to experience. Such assumptions are based on an inflated sense of self-importance, on a self that continuously demands to be pleased and protected against external threats to its all-powerfulness. Considering *anattā* helps to depiction these presumptions as mere projections. The *anattā* approach can expose a broad range of manifestations of a meaning of self.

According to the standard instructions for contemplating *anattā*, the five *khandhas* should be considered as devoid of 'mine', 'I am', and 'myself'. This analytical approach not only covers the last-mentioned view of a self, but also the mode of craving and attachment underlying the attribution of 'mine' to phenomena, and the sense of 'I am' as a manifestation of conceit and grasping. A clear understanding of the range of each *khandha* forms the necessary basis for this investigation, an understanding which can be gained through *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation. In this way, contemplation of the five *khandhas* commends itself in order to uncover patterns of identification and attachment to a meaning of self. A practical approach for this is to carry on questioning into the conception 'I am' or 'mine', lurking behind experience and activity. When this conception of an owner or agent behind experience has been visibly recognised, the above non-identification strategy can be implemented, by considering each *khandha* as 'not mine, not I, not myself'. Like this, reflection of the fivefold *khandha* as an application of the *anattā* approach can expose the representational aspects of oneself, those aspects responsible for the formation of a self-image. Practically applied like this, reflection of *anattā* can uncover the various types of self-images responsible for identifying with and clinging to one's social position, professional occupation, or personal possessions. Moreover, *anattā* can be employed to reveal mistaken superimpositions on experience, particularly the sense of a self-governing and independent subject reaching out to obtain or reject separate substantial objects.

In accordance with the Buddha's penetrative analysis, patterns of identification and attachment to a meaning of self can take twenty different forms altogether, by taking any of the fivefold *khandha* to be self, self to be in possession of the *khandha*, the *khandha* to be inside self, or self to be inside the *khandha*. The teaching on *anattā* aims at completely removing all these identifications with, and the corresponding attachments to, a meaning of self. Such removal proceeds in stages: with the realisation of stream-entry the belief in the existence of a permanent self (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*) is eradicated, while only with full awakening even the subtlest traces of attachment to oneself are forever removed. The teaching of *anattā*, however, is not directed against what are merely the functional aspects of personal existence, but only aims at the sense of 'I am' in relation to it. Otherwise an *arahant* would simply be unable to function in any way.

A well-known simile of relevance in this context is that of a chariot, which does not exist as a substantial thing apart from, or in addition to, its various parts. Just as the term 'chariot' is simply a convention, so too the superimposition of 'I'-identifications on experience are nothing but conventions. Nonetheless, to reject the existence of an independent, substantial 'chariot' does not entail that it is not possible to ride in the conditioned and impermanent functional assemblage of portions to which the notion 'chariot' denotes. In the same way, to repudiate the life of a 'self' does not mean a denial of the conditioned and impermanent interaction of the fivefold *khandha*. Another instance documenting the need to distinguish between emptiness and nothingness, in the sense of annihilation, occurs in a discourse from the *Abyākatasaṃyutta*. Here the Buddha, on being directly questioned concerning the existence of a self (*attā*), refused to give either an affirmative or a negative answer. According to his own explanation later on, if he would have simply denied the existence of a self, it might have been misunderstood as a form of annihilationism, a position he was always careful to avoid. In fact, although the scheme of the five *khandhas* opposes the self-notion and therefore appears essentially negative in character, it also has the positive function of defining the composites of subjective empirical existence. As a description of empirical personality, the five *khandhas* then point to those central aspects of personal experience that need to be understood in order to progress towards realisation.

A breakdown into all five *khandhas* may not be a matter of absolute necessity, since some passages document less detailed analytical approaches to insight. According to the *Mahā-*

sakuludāyi Sutta, for example, the simple distinction between body and consciousness constituted a sufficient degree of analysis for several disciples of the Buddha to gain realisation. Yet, most discourses operate with the more usual analysis of the mental side of experience into four *khandhas*. This more detailed analysis may be due to the fact that it is considerably more difficult to realise the impersonal nature of the mind than of the body. Compared to the previous *satipaṭṭhāna*, contemplations of similar phenomena (such as body, feelings, and mind), and contemplation of the *khandhas* stands out for its additional emphasis on exposing identification-patterns. Once these patterns of identification are seen for what they really are, the natural result will be disenchantment and detachment in regard to these five aspects of subjective experience. A key aspect for understanding the true nature of the *khandhas*, and thereby of oneself, is awareness of their impermanent and conditioned nature.

Arising and Passing Away of the *Khandhas*

The instruction for the contemplation of the fivefold *khandha* in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* requires a clear recognition of the *khandhas*, followed by contemplating their arising (*samudaya*) and their passing away (*atthagama*). This second stage of practice reveals the impermanent nature of the *khandhas*, and to some extent thereby also points to their conditioned nature. In the discourses, contemplation of the impermanent nature of the *khandhas*, and thereby of oneself, stands out as a particularly prominent cause for gaining realisation. Quite probably due to its powerful awakening potential, the Buddha spoke of this particular contemplation as his ‘lion's roar’. The reason underlying the eminent position of contemplating the impermanent nature of the *khandhas* is that it directly counters all conceit and ‘I’- or ‘mine’-making. The direct experience of the fact that every aspect of oneself is subject to change undermines the basis on which conceit and ‘I’- or ‘mine’-making take their stand. Conversely, to the extent to which one is no longer under the influence of ‘I’ or ‘mine’ notions in regard to the fivefold *khandha*, any change or alteration of the *khandhas* will not lead to sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. As the Buddha emphatically advised: let go of the *khandhas*, since none of them is truly your own.

In realistic terms, contemplate the arise and passing of each *khandha* can be undertake by noting change taking place in every facet of one’s personal know-how, be these, for instance, the cycle of breaths or the blood circulation in the body, the change of feelings from pleasant to

unpleasant, the diversity of cognitions and volitional responses arising in the mind, or the changing nature of consciousness, arising at this or that sense door. This way of practice then leads on to contemplating the arising and passing away of all *khandhas* together, once one surveys the fivefold *khandha*-component of any experience in a comprehensive way and at the same time witnesses the impermanent nature of this experience. The interrelatedness of the two aspects of impermanence and conditionality in the contemplation of the arising and passing away of the fivefold *khandha* is practically depicted in a discourse from the *Khandhasaṃyutta*, where realisation of the impermanent nature of the fivefold *khandha* takes place based on understanding their conditioned nature. Since the conditions for the arising of each *khandha* are impermanent, this passage points out, how could the conditionally arisen *khandhas* be permanent?

Additional discourse in the *Khandha Saṃyutta* relates the arising and passing away of the material *khandha* to nutriment, while feelings, cognitions, and volitions depend on contact, and consciousness on name-and-form. Dependent on nutriment, contact and name-and-form, the fivefold *khandha* in turn constitute the condition for the arising of pleasant and unpleasant experiences. The same discourse points out that against the all too apparent ‘advantage’ (*assāda*) of experiencing pleasure through any of the *khandhas* stands the ‘disadvantage’ (*ādīnava*) of their impermanent and thereby unsatisfactory nature. Thus, the only way out (*nissaraṇa*) is to abandon desire and attachment towards that fivefold *khandha*. A related viewpoint on ‘arising’ (*samudaya*) is provided in yet another discourse from the same *Khandhasaṃyutta*, which points out that delight provides the condition for the future arising of the *khandhas*, while the absence of delight leads to their cessation.

Conclusion

Eventually speaking, the one centrally important condition which can be brought under personal control through systematic training of the mind is identification with the fivefold *khandha*. This crucial conditioning factor of identification is the central focus of this *satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation, and its complete removal constitutes the successful completion of the practice. In accordance with the discourses, detachment from these constituent parts of one’s personality through contemplating the conditioned and impermanent disposition of the *khandhas* is of such

significance that direct knowledge of the arising and passing away of the fivefold *khandha* is a sufficient qualification for becoming a stream-enterer as well as a particularly powerful manifestation of the direct path to deliverance.

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