

The Five Skandhas

The human phenomenon that we identify as “self” consists of different elements. Our sense of ego is not a single, unchanging experience but a bundle of ideas about an ego that we project onto a stream of changing factors of mind and body. Buddhism classifies the basic elements that make up our individual existence, and all existence in general, into five aggregates or *skandhas* (Sanskrit for group, pile, bundle, collection, *khandha* in Pali):

1. *form/matter*, 2. *sensation/feeling*, 3. *perception/thought*, 4. *volition*, 5. *consciousness*.

Form (Sanskrit, *rupa*) means the material aspect of reality, the body and the world. It consists of the physical elements: earth (solidity, support, resistance), water (fluidity and dissolution), fire (heat and energy), air (wind and motion), and space. These basic elements form the physical universe, including our sense-organs and the sense-objects we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. This aggregate represents the physical qualities of corporeality, shape, color, size, spatial occupation, dimensionality, configuration, and connectivity. It includes all forces and forms of energy, mass and gravity, space and time, extension and distance; the laws and properties of physics; biological specifics such as vitality and nutrition, health and disease, femininity and masculinity, growth and decay; also the *forms* of bodily and verbal expression, and the mental representations of matter in the *form* of names and labels, imaginations, dreams, formula, symbols, and figures.

In the Eastern spiritual context, “form” also includes the “invisible” dimension of physics, the fundamental field and subtle energy structure that underlies and supports the material world, the patterns of primal energy that shape the universe and its constant transformation. Besides this “essence of the elements” there is still another category of formal matter that has not yet been detected by science, called “sensitive matter” (S. *pasada rupa*) or “animate materiality.” This is the sentient, living substance in every cell of living organisms, the root element of sense-organs. This form of energy enables the energy flow and transmission from material-sensory perception to brain signals to mental cognition. (This crucial link between biology and consciousness is still unknown, and the way in which matter and mind communicate is a pressing question for scientists).

Sensation (S. *vedana*) denotes mental and physical feelings, the impressions that arise when the senses contact *rupa/form*. There is not only sensing of the physical world that we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch, but also the world of mental representations and ideas, including language; mental faculties belong to the sixth *sense* for Buddhism. Sensation means subjective reaction and response, emotional evaluation upon experiencing objects and mental images, like physical pleasure and pain, mental delight and anguish, clinging and repulsive sensations, as well as physiological sensing such as feeling cold or hungry, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The six sensations are born from *contact* with world through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and the mind.

Perception (S. *samjna*) means the thinking, distinguishing and discriminating function of the mind; thought formation, mental process, conceptual ideation, cognition and recognition by way of discerning features and categorizing objects. It refers to rational and discursive thinking,

apprehending properties and designing mental objects, initiating and taking hold of ideas, images, and memories, to represent, interpret, identify, classify, and label observations, creating mental pictures of data and concepts to be grasped as “things.”

The perception/cognition skandha is the uninterrupted stream of thoughts that never leave us during this lifetime. We are born with it and as we grow up our intellect develops, identifies, differentiates, and grows strong until the whole complex of mental phenomena and views is regarded as an ego. What we consider as self is a *bundle* (skandha) of cognizance that we identify with, just as we identify with the [1] body and [2] feelings. (This aspect of cognitive psychology is well understood and the most scientific of the branches of psychology.)

Volition (S. *samskara*) is also called the “forming forces” and “mental formations” aggregate. It includes all volitional activities and their impact. Will and intention direct the way we think, speak, and act. Our priorities in life, choices and habits, impulses and predispositions that influence and propel our inner and outer conduct are conditioned by past intentions and actions. This ongoing mental formation is the basic processing force of life.

In general this skandha means process and production, the creative force that shapes and moves our life and the world. For an individual it indicates the current volitional tendencies and habit patterns, along with the karma-formations built up in former lives that generate our current life experience. It explains the basic, subconscious impulses that shape a character to think, feel and act in a certain way. Conditioning and reinforcement, compliance and resistance, attention and energy, desire and aversion, stimulation and resonance belong to this skandha. Above all, it explains the way we are born and the destiny that comes with it.

This skandha is the creative power of karma that carries us from life to life. As basic life force it steers formation and transformation, constituting the kinetic energy that keeps our bodies alive through the autogenous motions of breathing, blood circulation, cellular interaction, neuro-transmission, bio-electricity, brain-waves, and metabolism. It is the moving force of life, the driving energy that stirs, arouses, stimulates, agitates, disturbs, and confuses us without end, not giving us peace even when asleep.

It is the driving force of “the wheel of birth and death” (*Samsara*) that turns endlessly – beyond our knowledge and control. It is the will to live and to continue to exist, the restlessness that makes us move, even if we do not want to. It is the perpetual flux that causes everyone and everything to move on and never be the same; from the processing force that drives our lives to death, to the universal force of creation and destruction that is forever in motion and not to be stopped by any power. It is the evolving and revolving motion of the universe, the shaping force behind all worlds and beings in it, the power that summons genesis and termination, processing all existence or “thusness” in between – the never-depleted energy source of life and universe.

Consciousness (S. *vijnana*) is the capacity to be aware and know, the basic constituent of all experiences that makes us aware of the other skandhas. It functions as visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactile, and mental consciousness. It enables us to cognize things, to have a human life and interact with body and world. It is the knower *behind* the brain, body, feelings,

sense impressions, thoughts, and volitions, the source and background of them all. There is no person and no life-in-a-world without it; within it, all comes into existence.

According to Buddhism, there are eight kinds of consciousness. Besides the five sense-consciousnesses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, the *sixth* is that of thoughts and mental images; the *seventh* is the spontaneous intellect of life itself, such as the intelligence that knows how to grow and operate our body, long before we start thinking. It is the self-awareness behind perceptions, the ego-center that refers thoughts and emotions to a self, creating the impression of division and duality between self and other, subject and object.

This deeper layer of the mind is also the source of our problems. It perpetually stirs the mind with what Buddhism calls “vexations” or “afflictions” (*fan-nao* in Chinese) that are generated by the “three poisons”: [1] desire, attachment, greed, lust, [2] aversion, anger, hatred, and [3] ignorance, confusion, delusion. It colors the whole world and turns all impressions – which are in themselves neutral and do not stir the mind – into good or bad, likeable or dislikeable. It projects and superimposes these qualities on a reality that does not have them, thus distorting our view of self and the world. It immerses the mind in a stream of impure and unclear consciousness, convoluted by grasping and rejecting, loving and hating, arising from an undercurrent of self-opinion, self-concern, self-love, and self-conceit.

The *eighth* consciousness is the foundation of both the subjective mind and the objective world. It is the Spirit of religion (“in whom we live, move, and are”) and the monad of philosophy (“the one and ultimate constituent of the universe”). It functions like a database and operating system for both the personal, subjective mind as well as for the objective, cosmic intelligence. The physical world is the objective manifestation of this consciousness. Its phenomena are produced by the common information provided by the global consciousness of sentient beings, operating as collective forming force (karma).

For an individual, the eighth consciousness is not just the present, conscious mind but the collection of all imprints or “karmic seeds” generated, accumulated, and reinforced “since beginning-less time.” These imprints in the mind are called seeds because they reside in the “mind-ground” to mature and develop until they produce the fruits of our life experiences.

Buddhism calls the eighth consciousness “storage” or “container” (S. *alaya*) consciousness because it stores and contains all the seeds, inputs, residues, energy charges, or imprints from volitions, words, deeds, and their impact. All conscious acts, as they are played out in both inner thought and outer conduct, make a live impression on the eighth consciousness (like the sensor in a digital camera that is charged by incoming light photons). They remain there as specific charges with the potential to develop into images or perceptions until the appropriate circumstances appear to manifest themselves as full-blown, real-life perceptions.

The life experiences we have of ourselves and of others and the world are generated by the processing force *formed* by the fourth aggregate and *informed* by this consciousness. We only reap the fruits of the seeds we sow. We are reborn in this body and this world (not in heaven, for example) because we have planted the seeds for it in the past, and all that we see happening – in terms of life and mind, failure and success, good and bad luck, health and wealth – is what we

have initiated ourselves. Nothing comes from nothing, and nothing is anything else than effect from cause. The human phenomenon is not an exception to the universal law of causality.

The seeds of our activity are not static but dynamic, like the moving current of a stream, continually modifying and interacting with the inputs from the other seven consciousnesses. The *alaya* consciousness is the common ground of them all. It not only stores the impressions from every thought, word, and act we commit but also the universal seeds that contain all the forms of the universe. All these seeds, personal and global, are interconnected and sprout in the future when the appropriate conditions allow. What we presently experience are some results of our own individual seeds of personal fate and the shared karma of family, community, nation, and world.

All worlds (including heavens and hells) are produced by the seeds of this consciousness, and the reason why people share similar histories and common environments is due to similar seeds. Just as individual lives are the fruit of personal seeds, so does the world's appearance or *quantity* rest upon the *quality* of common karma and global consciousness. The manifestation and materialization of these seeds/imprints defines the world we experience.

This *alaya* consciousness is like an infinite web that instantaneously and simultaneously reflects all other seeds, to manifest the whole of actuality and potentiality of the physical, mental, and spiritual world. Nothing exists outside this all-encompassing presence of consciousness -- often interpreted as "God" by those who had a glimpse of it. But this is not the ultimate reality. The Substance of Mind itself is fundamentally, originally, and eternally pure and clear, like a mirror with an infinite capacity to reflect without itself being affected. Being empty and infinite in nature, its (finite) contents consist only of the imprints that are produced. The *alaya* consciousness, on the other hand, is an ever-changing process, like a fluctuating medium; it is not the unchanging substance of Ultimate Reality but its first-level projection. The forms and functions, laws and principles of the universe are its second-level projection. The world of life and death we know is its third-level projection.

Even this most basic level of consciousness does not constitute a self. As Confucius said when standing by a stream: "It passes on just like this, not ceasing day or night."¹ The appearance of a constant, identical stream or "soul" is an illusion; as the popular saying goes, "you cannot step twice into the same stream."

This ontology is part of the highest Buddhist teaching, called *Yogacara* in Indian Buddhism and "Consciousness-only" or "Creation by Mind Only" in Chinese Buddhism (*wei-xin*). These deeper levels of consciousness and of reality in general are empirical observations, based on the wisdom of enlightenment; they can be verified by everyone who reaches a sufficient level of clarity and insight. Buddhism provides a comprehensive description and systematic guidance for such mental clarification.²

1 Analects 9:17

2 William James thought that Western psychology would soon develop along Buddhist lines, but Freud came along and changed that course, unfortunately.

The skandhas, as basic elements of existence, are not to be considered as separate agents but as co-existing components and properties. It is not always possible to discern the skandhas separately. Thought, for instance, is intimately linked with the other skandhas:

That which is feeling, that which is perception, and that which is discriminative consciousness are associated, not dissociated, and it is not possible to lay down a difference between them, having analyzed them again and again. Whatever one feels, that one perceives, knows, and discriminates. (MN 43, 1.293)

“For the ignorant, it is hard to separate consciousness from sense faculty,” to distinguish the eye-faculty from the eye-consciousness, for example, or the body-feeling from the body-consciousness. But to see the skandhas as they are and for what they are, *as all there is* – with no self within, behind, or beyond – *means the end of suffering*:

When regarding things seen, heard, sensed, and cognized by you, in the seen there will be merely the seen, in the heard there will be merely the heard, in the sensed there will be merely the sensed, in the cognized there will be merely the cognized, then you will not be “by that.” When you are not “by that,” then you will not be “therein.” When you are not “therein,” you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. This itself is the end of suffering. (SN iv 73)³

All that exists – material or mental, secular or spiritual, visible or invisible, real or imaginable – falls within the five skandhas. They constitute the whole experience of life and the world and there is nothing about a person or about this or another world or heaven that exists outside them. There is no objectivity or subjectivity beyond consciousness, volition/forming force, perception/cognition, sensation, and form/matter. Analysis of the skandhas, if carried out thoroughly, shows that there is no core; it is like peeling an onion. There is no independent carrier or owner apart from its qualities. When all attributes and components, like ingredients, mass, weight, form, color, taste, and texture are removed from a piece of cake, for example, there is nothing left.

The Buddha warned against clinging to any phenomena as a real self, including the eighth consciousness: “The *alaya* consciousness is very deep and subtle; all its seeds flow on like a rushing stream. I don’t want to speak of it to the ignorant, for fear they will cling to it and take it as self.”⁴

The eighth consciousness is vast and deep as the ocean, the seventh and sixth are like waves on the surface, and the five sense consciousnesses are like ripples on the waves.

The skandhas make up our whole experience. Because they are our life and our world, we cling to them because it is all we know. They take hold of us because there is nothing else to hold onto. But when we assume them to be of real substance and treat them as our real being, then we suffer.

³ *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikku Bodhi (Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1175-6

⁴ *Samdhinirmocana Sutra*, chapter 5

Form is impermanent ... Feeling is impermanent ... Perception is impermanent ... Volitional formations are impermanent ... Consciousness is impermanent. What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is nonself. What is nonself should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: “this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.” Whatever kind of form ... feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it should appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form ... and consciousness? There are these five skandhas ... subject to clinging. So long as I did not directly know them as they really are, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment.
(SN 22:45, 95, 56; iii 44, 140, 58)

The condition for spiritual cultivation that leads to “the knowledge and vision of liberation” is therefore non-clinging and detachment, realizing the true nature of *all* phenomena. Liberation is not an abstract flight of the soul, but a concrete process of step-by-step disentanglement from, and transcendence of, the skandhas.

Without directly knowing and fully understanding the all, without developing dispassion toward it and abandoning it, one is incapable of destroying suffering. And what is that all? ... the eye ... forms ... eye-consciousness ... eye-contact ... and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition ... the ear ... the mind ... and whatever feeling arises with mind-contact as condition ... This is the all. Without directly knowing and fully understanding this all ... one is incapable of destroying suffering.
To see the eye as impermanent, forms, eye-consciousness, and eye-contact as impermanent, as impermanent whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition ... to see the eye as suffering ... and as suffering whatever feeling arises with mind-contact as condition ... to see the eye as nonself ... as nonself whatever feeling arises ... it is because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, “Empty is the world.”
The eye is empty of self and of what belongs to self ... Whatever feeling arises ... that too is empty of self ... Doesn't eye-consciousness ... ear-consciousness ... mind-consciousness arise in dependence on the eye and forms ... on the ear and sounds ... on the mind and mental phenomena? ... If the causes and conditions for the arising of consciousness would cease completely, could consciousness be discerned? For such a reason it is nonself. (SN 35:26)