

The Five Skandhas

Introduction

The Sanskrit word *skandha* means an aggregate or heap.

When we start to look more closely at what it is that makes up this thing we call “I”, we see that there are a number of factors here: the body, the senses, the mind...

In Buddhism, one of the ways of categorizing these various components is into what we call the “five skandhas”.

In actual fact, all conditioned phenomena may be included within these five groups, but when we are investigating the self, we restrict our inquiry to this form here, these thoughts, and so on.

FORM

In its broadest sense, form is spoken of in terms of causal and resultant forms. Causal forms are the elements of earth, water, fire and wind. Then, the resultant forms—which are made from these elements—are said to be eleven in number: the five sense faculties, the five sense objects and so-called “imperceptible forms”.

The sense faculties are not the ordinary sense organs, such as the eyes and ears, but ‘subtle’ forms within the sense organs. They have particular shapes which are described in the Abhidharma literature.

The first of the sense objects is **visual form**, which means the various colors and shapes that appear to our eyes. Colors may be divided into the four primary colors of white, red, yellow and blue; and the secondary ‘colors’ of They may be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Sounds, the objects of the ears, may occur naturally or be man-made, or a combination of the two as when a person beats a drum. A lot of sounds are just meaningless noise, but some impart meaning. In the case of the latter, they might be a vehicle for ordinary notions, or the sublime, liberating message of the Dharma. Sounds are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Smells may be naturally occurring or manufactured.

Tastes are said to be of six kinds, which roughly translate as sweet, sour, bitter, hot, astringent and pungent.

Textures may be felt on the body's exterior or interior. Interior 'textures' includes hunger and thirst or feelings of being ill or deeply relaxed.

Form here means basically our physical bodies. In general, it is what we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch, but also the organs that do the seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. In other words, the objects of our five senses and the five sense organs themselves.

FEELINGS

Although this is called the skandha of feelings, it does not mean emotional feelings, but something more like sensations, basically the painful, pleasant or neutral sensations in the body or pleasant or unpleasant sensations in the mind. (Neutral sensations of the mind are not counted separately, because according to Lama Norlha, they are indistinguishable from neutral sensations of the body.)

We are always experiencing sensations, mostly neutral ones, but also painful and pleasant.

They can also be thought of as the sensations that occur based on sense impressions. The sense object such as fragrant incense would belong under the category of form, but the sensation created when we smell the incense belongs in this category. In this case, it would be a pleasant sensation.

Feelings are the basis for desire and aversion, which create conflict mainly among uneducated lay folk.

PERCEPTIONS

Sensation itself is a very direct, straightforward experience. It is in the next instant that there arises a grasping at the object. This is perception, or recognition.

Perception means the apprehension of a specific object, as circumscribed and distinct from something else.

On the conceptual level, this is the recognition of identities or names, and on the sensory level the discernment of the five objects of sense.

Technically, perception is defined as “that which grasps or identifies characteristics”. Perception could be non-conceptual, in the case of the five physical senses, or conceptual in terms of the mind.

In all these cases, perception may be discerning (*mtshan bcas*) or non-discerning (*mtshan med*). The five non-conceptual sense perceptions are regarded as discerning when they are operating normally and perceiving their proper objects: colors/shapes, sounds, smells, tastes and textures. Mental perception is said to be discerning when it distinguishes identities or names. This happens when (a) the mind recognizes an object and associates it with its name, and (b) the mind knows what is referred to when a name is given.

Perception is non-discerning when the sense organ in question is fully functional but there is no object. This occurs in states of deep meditative absorption, and also when the mind is unable to identify and name objects, as, for example, when you encounter something for the first time and therefore do not recognize it. This is the common experience of children.

Mental perception is also non-discerning when it does not know what is referred to when names are given, as, for example, when an unknown language is heard.

(It should be noted that non-discerning perception does not refer to the mere privation of sensory stimulus, as, for example, when one is in a dark place with one’s eyes open or in a soundproof room. In these cases, the senses do in fact have objects—darkness and silence, respectively.)

There are as many possible types of perception as there are phenomena.

Perceptions are *subjective* experiences, and therefore the basis for disagreement and controversy, which lead to conflict among philosophers.

FORMATIONS

The category called formations as a whole is a little complicated. But if we just talk about **mental** formations, this basically refers to thoughts, and what we

refer to as the various mental states. Although there are many possible mental states, there are 51 that are considered particularly important.

Sensation and perception are actually included in these 51 but they are treated separately because they are especially noticeable.

I will not go into all 51, but they include the components necessary for any thought to occur: sensation, perception, intention (meaning the mind is directed towards a particular object), attention (meaning the mind is held on that object) and contact (meaning the coming together of an object, a functioning sense organ and consciousness).

There are then five states, which assist in the discernment of objects. These are interest, appreciation, mindfulness, concentration and discrimination. We're talking about these on a subtle level. For example, we need a certain amount of concentration to focus on a particular object, and some discrimination to identify it.

These first ten are called general mind states.

Then there are the virtuous states of mind such as inspiration or faith, flexibility, absence of attachment, absence of aggression, absence of delusion, and diligence.

There are the main non-virtuous states which are ignorance, desire, anger, pride, doubt and harmful beliefs; as well as the secondary negative states such as rage, spite, envy, deceit, stinginess, laziness and forgetfulness. Here we also include drowsiness and agitation, as well as distraction.

Finally, there are states which could be either positive or negative, including regret.

CONSCIOUSNESS

Consciousness here refers to the consciousness connected with the various senses, including the mind. For the consciousnesses of the five senses (seeing,

hearing, smell, taste, and touch) the first moment of consciousness is non-conceptual. Then the information is fed to the mental consciousness and concepts enter in.

The defiled mental consciousness is the thought of “I” and “mine” that comes from focusing on the alaya consciousness. It is absent in the meditation of noble beings, but never ceases in the mind streams of ordinary beings. According to Tsoknyi Rinpoche, this seventh consciousness is very connected with what we think of as our self-image. After we receive data from the senses, which are processed by the sixth consciousness, the defiled mental consciousness asks whether or not this information fits with what how we like to think of ourselves—our ‘image’, in other words.. There is consequently a lot of judgment at this level, paving the way for attachment and aversion.

The alaya consciousness is described as “mere knowing, an unspecified apprehension, the object of which is general and uncircumscribed”.

Based on Mipham’s Khenjuk, The Treasury of Precious Qualities and The Dharma by Kalu Rinpoche.