

The 5 skandhas

The activity of the mind unfold by the 5 skandhas, the 5 composite groups of mental processes and patterns, constituting all our experiences - yes, all of them...

a paper by Lama Tendar Olaf Hoeyer



The picture above shows the symbols of the 5 Buddha families with their respective colours as they are situated in most Mandalas of Buddhist Tantra. A relation exists between the 5 skandhas and the 5 Buddha-families. In some Mandalas, the position of the *Skandhas of Form and Consciousness* have been switched. I have with the picture above, indicated the average relation of the 5 skandhas to each other in most Mandalas. The Vajra family (at the bottom) symbolises the skandha of form, the Jewel family (to the left) symbolises the skandha of feeling, the Lotus family (on top) symbolises the skandha of perception, the Karma family (sword to the right) symbolises the skandha of samskara and the Buddha family (Dharma-wheel in the centre) symbolises the skandha of consciousness. The Buddha families symbolise much more than just the 5 skandhas, but that is not the subject of this paper.

Skandha (Tibetan: *phungpo*) means literally a *heap*, a *bundle* or a *collection* in Sanskrit, in the meaning of *composite group*. Normally, it is being translated by: *aggregate* or *aggregation*. The concept of 5 skandhas describes how, what we experience, run through *5 different groups of processes* in the mind. They are conceptually distinguished from each other, from the moment experiences arise in the mind as sensations, until they are being perceived consciously. So the 5 skandhas are describing the way, that our mind works. The experiences of the mind are formed step by step in each process, but this gradual development is not completely linear. These processes occur instantly, which means that they actually are almost simultaneous. So remember, that when contact appears in the skandha of form, there is instantly sense-consciousness and so on. You will find some degree of consciousness in conjunction with all the skandhas, though there is a special skandha of consciousness, the 5th skandha. The *conceptual* division into 5 aggregates shows the function of each level or process, makes the development of experience conceivable and helps in the understanding of the *relative ego*, as well as the *absolute absence* of an *essential Self*.

These 5 different aggregates do each in their own way influence, and all together produce all our experiences. In short, they are the activity of the mind. Mind is weaving an experience by five composite levels. An experience start with sensation and end with full awareness. In between beginning and end is at first an interpreted impression and then a mental and passionate reaction. The interpreted impression start as a feeling because of sensation.

The birth of an experience in 5 steps explains a single course of events by the 5 kinds of processes in the mind. Such development of a single experience in a single course of the 5, takes just a fraction of a second. The birth of an experience by a single course of the 5 skandhas is called *the moment of consciousness*. When such a birth has happened, the moment stop and close down, and the whole process is repeated from start, has its course in 5 steps, stops again, repeat again and so on, unstoppable through life, death, rebirth and until *Nirvana* takes place. This unstoppable stream of development in the experiences, is called *santana* in Sanskrit. Santana means literary a 'series'. That is: a series of conscious moments. It is on the flow of these conscious moments, that the yogi focus in meditation.

The idea of the 5 skandhas is Buddha Sakyamuni's simple and yet complex explanation of how, all experiences are formed, and how they appear in the mind. It is one of the oldest teachings in the Buddha Dharma. This paper is very condensed, so please read it slowly and with a lot of attention, so you do not miss the points.

The 5 aggregates are:

1. **FORM** Sanskrit: *rupa* – Tibetan: *zug* [gzugs]

Skandha of Form means, that *contact* (Sanskrit: *sparsa*) occurs between *sensual faculty* (Sanskrit: *indriya*, literally meaning: *capacity or power*) and *sense object* (Sanskrit: *visaya*), whereby the sensual faculty is being disturbed and activated. This is how actual sensation happens. In the Dharma, sensual faculty rather than the sense organ is described, because this is, what is being experienced, when someone meditating investigates, how sensation takes place in their own mind. There are 6 sensual faculties, corresponding to 6 kinds of sense objects and 6 kinds of sense-consciousness. The 6th sense-consciousness is consciousness about the mind. More on that later. Each contact occurs separately from any other contact on this level, because each sensual faculty operates independently from the others. All kinds of contact do in this way appear in some kind of form to the sensual faculties. These

forms are, what is seen, heard, tasted and so on. The sense objects may originate from the World or from the mind itself, for instance as dreams, visions and fantasies. Please note, that rupa is different from visaya. The 'objective' sense object is something different from the perceived sensation.

Form is called stimulus or disturbance.

2. FEELING Sanskrit: vedana – Tibetan: tsorbha

Skandha of Feeling means the immediate feeling of pleasure, displeasure or indifference, that is felt, when contact between sense object and sensual faculty has appeared in the skandha of form. In the same way, the skandha of feeling means attraction, rejection or neutrality – and excitement, disappointment or insensitivity and so forth. Also on this level, each feeling occurs separately from any other, because each feeling arises instantly from each individual sensation. There is dualism in the feeling skandha. You will instantly or instinctively understand yourself as the person, that feels something about something other than oneself. The quality of the feelings is by its own character both gross and intangible mental interpretation or conceptualisation.

The skandha of feeling is the quality of the disturbance in the skandha of form.

3. PERCEPTION Sanskrit: samjña – Tibetan: dyshe

Skandha of Perception means the combination and recognition of the raw experiences of the various sensations and feelings, that occurred in the two previous skandhas. In the skandha of perception, they are first of all perceived in all their varieties of different kinds of sensations, that originated in various sense-fields such as sound, sight, taste and so on, combined with the various feelings, that follow each of them, and they are now for the first time *perceived together* in a composite perception, Sanskrit: *jñeya*. A complete perception of all the qualified disturbances from the skandha of form and the skandha of feeling now appears in the mind.

Secondly, this combined perception is also *recognised* as something already known or as something, that looks or feels like something already known. For instance, a colour is recognised as, what is called 'red' and so on - or a shape now looks like a man, a woman and so forth. A holistic impression appears in the skandha of perception, where sound, taste, smell and so on fuse together in a complex package. It may be, that the food smells good, but tastes bad and looks indifferent, so all 3 qualities of the skandha of feeling may be present at the same time. Also, this raw composite experience is now recognised as 'food'. What happens here is called cognition, Sanskrit: *viññapti*. This involves an instant interpretation and judgement of the mental impression.

The skandha of perception is the mental impression of the qualified disturbances in the skandha of form. A summary of the sense-fields, feelings and recognitions.

The 6 kinds of sense objects, the 6 kinds of sensual faculty and the 6 kinds of sense consciousness are all together called the *18 dhatus*. This is normally translated as the 18 sensual areas, or sometimes realms, regions, spheres and also - somewhat incorrectly - elements (an element is otherwise called *bhuta* or *dharma* in Sanskrit). The meaning is, that there are *18 dimensions*.

The 6 kinds of sense objects and the 6 kinds of sensual faculty are called the *12 ayatanas*, normally translated as the 12 sense-bases or fields, literally meaning sources or gates.

There are not only the 6 sensual faculties, called *indriyas* in Sanskrit (literally meaning: *powers*). The *indriyas count 22*, because other faculties than the sensual kind are counted as well, such as life, sex and many others, that are not explained in this paper.

4. SAMSKARAS Tibetan: dy ye [dy byed]

Samskara Skandha means first of all, that the events in the previous 3 skandhas now cause a *reaction* in the mind, generally based on our experiences from memory. *Experience from memory* means, that an

understanding, an evaluation or a judgement about the impression, instantly presents itself on this level. *Experience from memory* can also mean, that a skill, a knowledge of how to handle situations, or a knowledge about how things work – already developed, habituated and memorised in the mind – manifest itself in the mind. Thereby suggesting a proper reaction or actually producing such a reaction, depending on your habits. Reaction is caused by memory of some previous experiences of a similar kind to the actual impression, that has now appeared from the third skandha of perception. So, the mind naturally reacts to the sensual or mental impression, according to your experience from memory. Samskara literally means *that which has been put together* and *that which puts together*.

This instant reaction may actually originate from several sources, depending on the nature of the impression, as it is instantly understood, judged or evaluated on this level. These sources are: *the will (as a habit, Sanskrit: cetana), habits, tendencies, abilities, experiences from memory, concepts* and *passions*. Coherence is now being created. The impression is instantly being interpreted for context. The present is now being linked to the past and the future. Until samskara skandha, the experience only existed in the here-and-now. Now, the experience is understood or misunderstood and reacted to, according to your experiences from memory.

A habit is called a samskara, habits are called samskaras in plural. So all these samskaras are the patterns by which we *conceptualise* our mental impressions and react, as we instantly understand, judge or evaluate these. In this way, samskaras are also our *habitual patterns of action*. Habitual patterns of the mind rest hidden, arise spontaneously and disappear from view again in a very particular way. They arise as sudden mirror-like reflections of meaning imposed upon the mental impression from the third skandha. They so to speak, almost live their own lives in the mind, or you could say, that samskaras exist in their own unconscious way, and make up our autobiography and our luggage for reincarnation. These habitual patterns are the only things, that we take along with us from this life into the next, when we die - also those, that we do not like.

Samskara skandha is also translated as as: *ideation, memory* and *mental formations*. Samskaras may in general be categorised as *reactionary patterns*. If we have to translate the term with only one word, it will be: *will, habits, tendencies, concepts, abilities, experiences from memory* and *passions*. I therefore do not translate the word samskaras but use it as a technical term, because it covers so much. It means both composition, connection and that, which makes the connection. So it is both *existing patterns* in the mind as well as *pattern-creation*. The patterns of the mind can also be described as *states of mind* in the general meaning of the word, in that the concepts, passions and so on *embrace* the impressions from the previous

skandha, and *attach* themselves to these. That is so, as a result of of the very mental processes themselves, based on the predetermined structure of the mind. First impression, then reaction - instantaneously, just like a light hitting a mirror reflect back at once, leaving actually no time at all for conscious intervention. You should also note, that if you want to interfere consciously, you have to get used to do it first. It will not work, if it is not a habit in itself. Formal meditation is the best method for just that.

In this way, among samskaras are also the so-called *veils* of *ignorance* (Sanskrit: *avidya*), *karma* and *passion*, that hide the Buddha-nature from immediate recognition, because they instantly arise in connection with any experience on this level. So samskara skandha is always *distorting* the impressions, until you gain insight and wisdom.

The central point of samskaras is the *will* (Sanskrit: *cetana*), that organises all the other habits, tendencies, concepts, abilities, experiences from memory and passions. Please note, that **cetana** is the **will-as-a-habit**. Cetana is of course also any ill-will, that has established itself. The *free* will is more or less an illusion as something completely free, because it is always based on concepts. Take for instance the concept of freedom. In this sense, samskaras are always *prejudicial*. Without concepts, you do **not** understand anything, and then you do not **will** anything. Then you do not know, how to understand whatever, or what to do about it. So, good and beneficial concepts and habits as well as kindness, are precious to gather and grow, because they will then become your habitual reaction.

Please note, that cetana is unable to govern the passions. Cetana may only regulate the mental reactions to whatever emotionality present, because the passionate feelings arise as a spontaneous reaction to the interpreted mental impressions at the same time and in parallel with the reactions from the experiences from memory, that cetana organize.

The problematic thing about samskaras is, that we create them in a conscious effort, when we build a habit, but after that, they function on their own. Watch for instance, how very small children learn to walk. We are born with some samskaras, that define all sentient beings as well as some, that are the specific human characteristics. They kind of lie dormant in the mind as more or less unconscious *tendencies* and *talents*, and are being released into immediate reaction, when they are stimulated by the impressions from the third skandha, unless we consciously interfere and cultivate other habits, or if we consciously chose to let go of, what we usually do, and get used to do that.

Since these habitual patterns of action and conceptualisation are the reason for our way of understanding or misunderstanding our impressions, they are the cause of *karma*, which means our actions and their consequences, the history of our lives. What happens here, leave traces in the *mind-stream* (Sanskrit: *santana*), that runs from one moment to the next moment and so on, whereby *seeds* (Sanskrit: *bija* = seed) are formed in the mind for more or less predictable events in the future. Our experiences from memory all contain seeds for future karma.

Please note, that samskaras mean the typical reaction patterns to any given situation, while karma indicate your history with these typical reaction patterns. So, karma seeds (Sanskrit: *bijas*) are kind of stored in the mind together with these samskaras, containing your history of handling these reaction patterns at previous occasions. When thus a samskara is waken to activity because of an interpreted mental impression from the third skandha, then also the corresponding karma seed is woken up simultaneously.

Samskaras are not inaccessible to us, but they work in a hidden way, and we only notice them, when they manifest by themselves as natural reactions, or we lure them to appear by artificial means. In this way, they are both *unconscious* luggage and *potential content* of the consciousness. Samskaras are also designated as *mental events*. That is just another way of saying mental states. There are lists of them. The common count (from *Asanga*) is 51 samskaras. Of course, there are many more. The 51 have to do with the work on Enlightenment. Samskaras are all the things, that we do, without thinking about, how we do it. Samskaras are both helpful and an obstacle to enlightenment.

They are not only our tendencies, talents and passions, but they are also our *limitation*. Every time we have to accustom ourselves to new things and new ways of doing stuff, it is a tiresome conscious effort. Once learned, habits have been formed in the mind, that free us from this attentive exercise. It is this complete dependency on habits, that limits us and makes us predictable. Without samskaras, we would not understand or comprehend anything, so we do need them, indeed. In the Dharma we also need to understand and recognise, how they work, in order to avoid their dominance, their distortion and the consequent prejudice. *Samskara skandha* is the **reaction** to the impressions of the qualified disturbances in the Skandha of Form. You will find, that samskaras are number two in the list of mutual interdependence, the 12 links of dependent origination.

(Samskaras mean something slightly different - and yet almost the same - within the Hindu religions. Particularly, it means something about the human character.)

5. CONSCIOUSNESS Sanskrit: vijñana – Tibetan: namshe

Skandha of Consciousness means, that the composite, interpreted and conceptualised experience is being exposed to the *clarity of mind*. Consciousness will be present in all the other skandhas to a degree, but normally, it will first turn into *full awareness*, when a completely developed and conceptualised experience presents itself. As a technical term in the Dharma, consciousness is not the ability to analyse, which - as we have seen - demands quite some samskara activity. It is the bare and simple ability to *know* and *experience*. There is no prejudice about anything in consciousness. It is pure clarity. You do not have to produce such clarity. It is naturally present all the time in all sentient beings. It is the previous 4 skandhas, that modify and distort, what we perceive as experience. Consciousness is crucial for attention and wakefulness, but these two need habits for their base in order to work properly.

The skandha of consciousness is both the *background* for any actual experience and your only *possibility* for liberation from the dominance of your experiences, from their obsession, influence, distortion, dejection, inspiration or disappointment. **Only through consciousness can mind recognise itself.** In other words, if you want to transcend suffering and entertain happiness, you must ascertain this quality of clear, unstained awareness in your own mind. It is there, in spite of your natural misgivings about such clarity. Unborn or pristine clarity is your undeserved inheritance as a sentient being.

(It is due to the 3 kinds of veils, that you are unaware of the mind's inborn clarity. These veils are those of ignorance, kleshas and karma, and they manifest in the fourth skandha, from where they arise in consciousness, along whatever else is being experienced, thus clouding and hiding mind's pristine clarity and keeping you unaware about it. Instead of unborn clarity, you see only the veils covering and colouring the 8 kinds of consciousness)

When mind is deluded by the 3 veils, consciousness is coloured and loaded accordingly. When the veils are lifted or dissolved, consciousness will recognise it's own nature, due to it's pristine clarity, that is now uncovered, unhidden and unobstructed.

In modern Western psychology, very different terms are used about consciousness, so it is important to note, that consciousness, as a technical term in the Dharma, means something very specific, that is the *pure I-am-aware* in the mind. To be aware about something. The *content* of consciousness is the previous 4 skandhas.

There are 8 kinds of consciousness, that conceptually correspond to their content. You can also say, that there are 8 *dimensions* of consciousness in experiences.

First of all, there is the general *mental space* around and inside all experiences. That is termed *alaya-vijñāna* in Sanskrit or *spaciousness of mind*. Literally it means container consciousness. *Alaya* means container. *Vijñāna* means consciousness. So, the meaning is space awareness. The base aspect of mind is, that it *contains* all and whatever experiences. Without any effort, spaciousness of mind embrace and provide space for all your experiences to unfold.

Some translations read storehouse-consciousness or store-consciousness. That is so, because the samskaras along with the seeds-of-karma (Sanskrit: *bija*) are so to speak stored in this space of mind. How this can be so, is explained elsewhere (in Asanga's book: *Abhidharma-samuccaya*).

For meditators, spaciousness of mind is very important in the actual insight meditation. How inactive samskaras are stored, is less important, though it is a very interesting topic. So we should note, that Asanga emphasises the kind of awareness that contains and encompass the 7 other kinds of consciousness. Mind-space, spaciousness of mind or Alaya is space-awareness. To be conscious about the presence of mental space in and around experiences. Please note, that it is the mind space, that contains and surrounds the experience of the space of the Universe, Sanskrit: *akasha*. So, the space of mind is always greater than the space of the world, even the head is small and the world very vast.

Then secondly, there is the mind passionately attached to and identified with the World, which is termed *clinging-mind* (Sanskrit: *klesha-citta* - klesha means *passionately clinging*, or *attachment*. Citta means mind. So kleshacitta is the sticky emotional potential. As a kind of consciousness, it is called *klisthmano-vijñāna*, the gooeey [klistha] or viscid mind-consciousness, that actualise emotional clinging and fixation). Because of passionately clinging and craving, this attachment-mind seeks, cherishes and suffers incarnation in the World. This is the tiger, that all of us ride on. It is also the source of wisdom-mind (Sanskrit: *jñāna*, tibetan: *yeshe*). Please remember that. Never despise emotionality. Let go of it, while discovering the wisdom and let it be.

These two kinds of consciousness was introduced into Buddhist thinking by *Asanga*. In the classical pre-Asanga tradition, spaciousness of mind is regarded as *Dharmadhatu*, the dimension of dimensionality, and therefore not a kind of mind in itself. The *kleshas* (Sanskrit for *passions*) were correctly regarded as some special samskaras, and therefore neither any special kind of mind. Asanga introduced the concepts of these two kinds of consciousness in order to illustrate for the meditator, what needs special attention in the analytical part of insight meditation (Sanskrit: *vipashyana*). The clinging-mind is, what you have to let go of, and the spaciousness of mind is, what you have to hold on to. So you could say, that Asanga is the

psychologist, while his critic *Chandrakirti* is the philosopher. Neither of them is wrong.

Finally, mind is also the 6 kinds of sense-consciousness, corresponding to the 6 kinds of sensual faculty. In the Dharma, intellect - including emotional intelligence - is termed a sense-consciousness. It is called *mind-consciousness* (Sanskrit: *mano-vijñana*, consciousness about mental forms). The sense objects for the mind-consciousness are thoughts, feelings, passions, concepts, perceptions, sensations and so on. Whatever goes on in the mind-stream (Sanskrit: *santana*), can be watched by the mind-consciousness.

So please note, that when you think about something, it is like a game of tennis. First a thought appears in samskara skandha as a reaction to some impressions. Then, when you start to think about it consciously, it's formulation appears in the skandha of form. Then it is being treated in the other skandhas. After that, it may once again reappear altered, distorted or developed in the skandha of form, and again run through the other skandhas and so on. The same goes for other sensations. There is a rapid succession of *ping-pongs* going on in the mind-stream very very fast indeed - all the time. One **moment** of consciousness, is **one** run through the 5 skandhas of **one** experience. *Mind-stream* (Sanskrit: *santana*) means, that consciousness is jumping from one such moment to the next. It is said, that there is really really nothing and no nothing in between moments, because there are no skandhas there.

(The skandhas only exists momentarily. *No nothing* means, that even nothingness is absent. With the skandhas absent, there are no experience, nor consciousness. Also, there is no time, because there are no movements in between moments. Since one moment is different from the next, there is a real gap between them without time, that cannot be denied. This non-consciousness in non-time gives rise to many thoughts. You cannot experience such gaps, because they appear, when the skandhas stop. There is a kind of non-existence there)

Please also note, that there are a terrible lot of such moments in just one second of time. It is mazing, how much information is handled in a split second by the wondrous jumping santana flow.

The 6 kinds of sense-consciousness are termed: **nose-**, **ear-**, **tongue-**, **eye-**, **mind-** and **body-**consciousness. The 6 kinds of sense consciousness work in the same way, whether you are dreaming or awake. Therefore it is said, that life is **not** a dream – it is **like** a dream.

So the last 7 kinds of consciousness can be regarded as the clarity aspect of mind, because through them you may experience mind's pristine clarity, while the spaciousness of mind is the base aspect. This is the simple and basic psychology for Dharma trainees.

Why teaching on the 5 skandhas and the rest?

(With the rest is meant the 8 kinds of consciousness, the 12 ayatanas, the 18 dhatus and the 22 indriyas)

[They are there] so to act as a remedy against the 3 kinds of belief in an essential Self. The 3 kinds of belief in a Self, is the belief of unity [in the Self], the belief in a perceiver and the belief in an acting Self.

So does Vasubandhu write in *Summary of the 5 Skandhas*, translated by Artemis B. Engle and published as: *The Inner Science of Buddhist Practise*.

Conclusion

The reason, that Buddha Sakyamuni taught about the 5 skandhas, is for you to learn to recognise them, while you meditate. Particularly, when you perform the analytical part of lhagthong - or insight - meditation (Sanskrit: *vipashyana*). This is the self analysis of the meditator, that corresponds to the experience of meditation. You live your life thinking that you are something, but in reality, your person is simply the 5 skandhas, the way your mind works. It is really something very insubstantial, universal and impersonal. All sentient beings function in this way. Since all beings always find themselves in unique and individual situations, they are always different from each other. You cannot be more person than that, even though life is maybe much more personal, than we might think or want.

By the 5 skandhas we are *coupled* to our surroundings. Our perceptions of the surroundings are also *inside* the 5 skandhas. It all happens in the present moment of consciousness, the here-and-now, that is our only chance for liberation and awareness. If we do not grab the opportunity, we will become overwhelmed by our attachments, our prejudices and habits. We will then identify with the will-as-a-habit (Sanskrit: *cetana*) and become victims of the unconscious processes of the mind. *It does not have to be like this*, but it is very difficult to avoid. It takes a long time of training and understanding to avoid being attached to our experiences and to avoid the usual identifications. Please note, that training alone is not enough. *Wisdom* is also needed in order to reach the *path of insight*, one of the 5 paths of the Dharma. The point is of course, that the mind naturally liberates itself, when it does recognise itself, which it will, when all hindrances are removed or dissolved. The obstructions to enlightenment are the 3 veils of avidya, kleshas and karma, along with their consequences.

The 5 Paths (Sanskrit: pancha marga - Tibetan: lam nga) are:

- 1) Path of gathering (of excellent qualities or merits and wisdom),
- 2) Path of preparation (adaptation),
- 3) Path of insight (insight as a consequence of *samadhi* and the correct application of the analytical *vipashyana*),
- 4) Path of meditation (not meditation as an exercise or training, but as an accomplished skill and the application of mastery in meditation - sanskrit: *dhyana*),
- 5) Path of no more learning. This means the fully matured and perfected prajna (wisdom) and upaya (skilful means). This accomplishment covers the last 3 of the 10 Bodhisattwa *bhumis* or levels.

The 5 Skandhas from Sutra

The 5 skandhas are conditioned states (Sanskrit: *samskritas*), that arise from causes and conditions. They are conditioned by 1) their arising - 2) their [development in] time and change - and 3) their disappearance.

“Form is like a ball of foam, feeling is like a bubble in water, perception is like a mirage, samskara is like the core of the banana-tree [it has no core] and consciousness is like a ghost.”

from Samyuta Nikaya.

From the Sutra, once more:

In this way, suffering arises, in dependence on the [5] aggregates, and watered by desire, it increases greatly.

By means of the path, one sees all dharmas [elements of experiences] as equal, and by means of the [Buddha] Dharma, which cleanses and purifies, one puts an end to suffering.

So said Buddha Sakyamuni in The *Lalitavistara Sutra* (page 633) at the occasion of the first turning of The Wheel of Dharma in a speech to his first 5 monks.