



Layers & Levels Chapter 1

Some Basics: The Five Skandhas

This Series begins by gathering together some basic notions and examples to accumulate vocabulary and terms of reference. To that end it seems appropriate to introduce a bedrock descriptor from the Buddhist Tradition known as the Five Skandhas which involve a similar process of accumulation or gathering together. As is always the case with terms from different eras and civilizations we must spend a little time on the language, so as usual first I will first present an official definition and then unpack it into more user-friendly language, which is traditionally known as ‘commentary’.

From https://www.encyclopediaofbuddhism.org/wiki/Five_skandhas:

Five skandhas (S. pañca skandha; P. pañca khandha; T. phung po lnga, ཕྲུང་པོ་ལྔ་པ་), or five heaps or five aggregates, are five psycho-physical aggregates, which according to Buddhist philosophy are the basis for self-grasping.

They are:

rupa-skandha - aggregate of form

vedana-skandha - aggregate of sensations

samjñā-skandha - aggregate of recognition, labels or ideas

saṃskāra-skandha - aggregate of volitional formations (desires, wishes and tendencies)

viññāna-skandha - aggregate of consciousness

The five skandhas are essentially a method for understanding that every aspect of our lives is a collection of constantly changing experiences. There is no one aspect that is truly solid, permanent or unique. Everything is in flux. Everything is dependent upon multiple causes and conditions.

For example, *rupa-skandha* refers to everything in our material world – our body and our physical surroundings. All these things are constantly changing. *Vedana-skandha* refers to our sensations that are positive, negative or indifferent – all our sensations are fleeting, changing from moment to moment. *Samjna-skandha* refers



to all of our recognition or labeling of everything that we see, hear, smell, touch, or think; these labels are also constantly in flux. *Samskara-skanda* (all of our mental habits, thoughts, ideas, opinions, prejudices, compulsions, etc.) are dependent on many causes and conditions and always changing. Our consciousness itself is not one single thing, but a collection of consciousness (*vijnana-skandha*) that are also constantly changing.

In the Buddhist view, by contemplating on the characteristics of the skandhas, we can overcome self-grasping. Self-grasping is attachment to the concept of a self that is unique, independent and permanent. In the Buddhist view, it is this attachment to this distorted view of the self that is the root cause of suffering. Therefore, by letting go of this attachment, we can liberate ourselves from suffering.

Generally, the Buddhist Encyclopedia is excellent. You will note that the final paragraph above mentions the path, or process, aspect of this notion. I am not going to be delving into that overmuch because this Series is more about View, not training or implementation. All Buddhist teachings contain elements that are worked on via practice without which they would be essentially purposeless; and all teachings are examined in the light of practice and daily life without which they would be meaningless; but this Series is not about Buddhism or Buddhist practice per se although much from that tradition may wander in. With that caveat out of the way for the rest of the Series, let us continue, first with the definitions:

Skandhas: the translations above are fairly standard, namely ‘heaps’ or ‘aggregates’. The idea is that they are things bundled together. We could also say: collections, agglomerations, clusters, bunches, constellations, [mandalas](#). Again from the Encyclopedia:

Prior to the Buddha, the Pali word khandha had very ordinary meanings: A khandha could be a pile, a bundle, a heap, a mass. It could also be the trunk of a tree. In his first sermon, though, the Buddha gave it a new, psychological meaning, introducing the term clinging-khandhas to summarize his analysis of the truth of stress and suffering. Throughout the remainder of his teaching career, he referred to these psychological khandhas time and again.

So the word ‘skandha’ comes from everyday usage but the Buddha added a qualifier to indicate psychological clinging, or ‘self-grasping’. What this means is that all experience – for these are terms describing experience, not an imagined ‘objective world out there’ – is funneled through the habit or tendency of self-referencing, aka ‘me’. (We are all narcissists, baby!) From now on in the Series I will simply use the word ‘skandha’ rather than ‘heap’ or ‘bundle’.

Now we can examine them without language entanglement, for they are interesting and in this Series we will be examining a wide variety of also interesting things. The



five skandhas basically describe what and how we experience ourselves as ‘me’. There are different layers and levels to this experience which is why they are the ideal choice to kick off this Series.

The first level of experiencing, *rupa-skandha*, has to do with form, the literal translation of *rupa*. In the text above this is described as ‘everything in our material world – our body and physical surroundings’. This features the appearance of shapes, of course, but really if you think about it this involves experiencing the seeming dimension of space wherein there is a difference between here and there, one tree and the next, sky and earth, eyeball and finger, self and other. Even before we open our eyes, we are aware of this spatial dimension, but as soon as we do so it comes rushing in, full-blown, instantly grokked. Infants spend their first few months gradually putting it together whilst we do so in an instantaneous flash. Even though everything at this level is constantly changing with no end of forms coming and going, our sense of this spatial dimension seems constant and indeed it seems like there is some sort of solid reliable world out there. This experiencing of ‘the world out there’ is the first skandha of form.

The second level or layer of experiencing, has to do with feeling: ‘*Vedana-skandha* refers to sensations that are positive, negative or indifferent’. Some things feel good and we like them, others feel bad and we dislike them, and others we don’t care about one way or another. So with the first skandha we experience a world through which we navigate, much like a fish through water, but here it is a tad more involved: there are other fish and phenomena, some of whom want to eat us, which we don’t like and so avoid, others of whom we do like to eat and so find attractive, whilst yet other features in the landscape, like various rocks and seaweeds, we just pass on by with little feeling either way. As with the first skandha, though the range of feelings experienced is limitless and constantly changing, the dimension in which feeling arises seems continuously there in that we are always feeling some sort of passion, aggression or ignorance.

The third level or layer of experiencing has to do with recognition: ‘*Samjna-skandha* refers to all of our recognition or labeling of everything that we see, hear, smell, touch, or think; these labels are also constantly in flux.’ We are becoming familiar with the terrain, we can distinguish sharks from seaweed and learn how to use the latter to hide from the former. Everything we experience is immediately processed as friend,



foe or neutral. This of course is based on the first and second skandhas, so these layers or levels are somewhat progressive even though experientially they happen all at once.

The fourth level or layer has to do with motivation and intention: ‘*saṃskāra-skandha* - aggregate of volitional formations (desires, wishes and tendencies)’. We develop ways of surrounding ourselves with friendlies to ward off unfriendlies and so forth. Or maybe we group together with our friends and family to proactively seek out and banish the predators from our little corner of paradise. As you can see, this follows naturally from the first three skandhas.

The fifth level or layer has to do with consciousness: ‘Our consciousness itself is not one single thing, but a collection of consciousness (*vijnana-skandha*) that are also constantly changing.’ Consciousness is once we have the four previous skandhas we have a sense of being a ‘me’ managing experience through this rich, ever-changing terrain, with friends, enemies and neutrals, with likes and dislikes, with needs and schemes to end up with more positive than negative experiences and the ability, via consciousness, over time to fashion our own best version of how to manage all this and how to fashion a life for ourselves, be it in a favela or palace, a jungle or garden, as a philosopher or bandit. In other words, at this level of consciousness we can both hear and tell stories with which we weave together a world of the self that makes sense over time, with beginning, middle and end.

Now these five skandhas can be examined on very deep levels and indeed long books have been written about them over the centuries. Probably they will pop up in future chapters but for now our work is mainly done because what is initially most interesting about them in this Series context is that they are a great example from classic philosophical and metaphysical teachings about how indeed reality comprises various layers and levels. What we think of as one simple thing is always a conglomeration of no end of multi-faceted multiplicities. So in terms of our experience of being individual human beings, there are these five basic levels or layers: form, in which things are experienced within apparent three-dimensional space - which quantum science has shown is created by our cognitive-perceptual faculties able to experience space that way; feeling – basic pain, pleasure and neither; recognition – recognizing that which is hostile, friendly or neutral; motivation – managing the terrain to get the best possible outcome; and consciousness – the self-experienced person who seemingly remains a constant throughout all this moment to moment production of drama after drama.

They all happen at once and yet are distinct. And although they are distinct [mandalas](#), they comprise different, ever-changing elements or particulars time after time. So they



are there, tangibly as it were, but also they are not. The main point here is that our experience, whole and unitary as it seems as a seemingly solid, continuously unfolding ‘me’, is a kaleidoscopic accumulation (skandha) of various inter-related layers and levels. You can see how the fifth skandha depended upon the other four so clearly there is a progression or hierarchy of elemental properties; and yet they all happen at once, just as within our bodies the blood, nervous, digestive, emotional and mental systems all operate separately but simultaneously and together. They can be distinguished and categorized as different but they operate within a single, interdependent whole comprising many layers and levels.

Form – Feeling – Recognition – Motivation – Consciousness

For those who like this sort of thing, I recommend reading the entire article linked above on the Five Skandhas. The language is traditionally formal but the subject matter is full-on gourmet with links to related topics like The Eight Consciousnesses and Co-dependent Origination (*Pratityasamutpada* in the *Prajnaparamita*) which are similarly fascinating.

IMAGE:



Five Skandhas in Action