



The Five Skandhas

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Geshe la: Today we are talking about the five skandhas. Skandha, in Sanskrit, means the aggregate, heap, or pile. Our world can be divided into two worlds: The material world and the consciousness world. These two worlds come under the category of five skandhas. We cannot find any part of our world that manifests through means other than these five skandhas. The five skandhas, or aggregates, are: 1) form, 2) feeling, 3) recognition, 4) discrimination and 5) consciousness.

The first skandha, form, refers to everything in the world that can be seen, heard, tasted, smelled or touched. Or one could say that the objects of the 5 senses are said to be form aggregate. Form aggregate is a composite of the 4 elements: Earth, water, fire and air. Form has shape, structure, color and size.

The second skandha, feeling, is one of the mental factors, or *semgung* in Tibetan. The mental factor that has responsibility to feel feelings and assist, or cooperate, with other mind and mental factors to share pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings.

The third skandha, recognition, is a particular mental factor that has the responsibility to recognize things and differentiate them from one another. It is also responsible for assisting and cooperating with other mind and mental factors to share this recognition in mutual agreement.

The fourth skandha, discrimination, is also a particular mental factor. It is similar to recognition but different in that discrimination is judgmental. It is the mental factor that makes one thing better than another. For example, differentiating that my faith or belief is better than that of others', without regard for the validity of the beliefs.

The fifth skandha, consciousness, is any consciousness other than form, feeling, recognition or discrimination, which are said to be aggregates of consciousness (i.e., wisdom, anger, jealousy, etc.).

So one can tell that we cannot be aware of our world other than through these five aggregates. Not only are the material worlds composites of these five, but beings are also composites of these five. For example:

Mr. Jim is purely a composition of these five aggregates. Therefore, we cannot find Mr. Jim other than through these five aggregates. Each of these five aggregates are not the Mr. Jim but we can hypothetically recognize Mr. Jim on the basis of these five aggregates. We say Mr. Jim is happy when his feeling states are pleasant and that he is not happy when his feeling states are unpleasant.

We ordinary beings, see that there is a sense of 'I' in the components of the aggregate. This

view is mistaken because when we search for that 'I' we will not find it. When we don't search for it, it seems to be present. This shows that 'being', or 'I' is merely imputation or designation on the basis of the five aggregates.

Student: Geshe la, in the Heart Sutra there is the phrase, "The Five Skandhas are empty of nature", can you expand on this?

Geshe la: Yes. The five skandhas do not possess their self sufficient entity and they do not exist from their own right. They depend on many factors for their existence. When with our ordinary mind, we see these five aggregates, we get a sense of formness or feelingness or Mr. Jimness. When in fact, there is no such quality that exists from the perspective of Mr. Jim that serves as Mr. Jim. Though it seems to be that there is a something that exists from the perspective of Mr. Jim as an independent entity, when we search for it, it is lost in the middle of these five components. This lostness proves it is empty in nature.

Student: Please explain more about the difference between feelings and things like anger or jealousy.

Geshe la: Anger and jealousy are the results of feelings. It is very clear that you will have anger or jealousy when you have feelings of unhappiness, mental discomforts, or dissatisfactions. Without having feelings of unhappiness or mental discomforts you will never have anger or jealousy. Can you get angry when you are in an ocean of joy and pleasant feelings? The answer is, of course not! Anger and jealousy are the results of negative feelings. They are something like cause and effect. Or one could say that anger and jealousy are the symptoms of negative feelings.

Student: Then the idea of these skandhas is closely tied with the idea of 'anatta' or no-self?

Geshe la: Yes.

Student: When you talk about ego, is it correct to say "surrender" it when you leave it behind? What do you surrender to? In other words, when we surrender our ego is it a surrendering to our Buddha nature?

Geshe la: Yes. If we are able to successfully surrender our ego then one would say surrendering to our Buddha nature. But, I think one must have sufficient understanding of what the Buddha nature is and the destruction caused by the ego.

Student: How are these skandhas affected by the process of death and rebirth?

Geshe la: The five skandhas are affected by the process of death and by the process of rebirth differently. The skandhas are affected by the process of death by returning to their original sources and affected by the process of birth by bringing them forward with full maturation. At death the five skandhas dissolve. At birth, they are brought to the forefront.

Student: Is the process of observing the skandhas still a skandha?

Geshe la: Observation itself is a piece of the whole, so it would be a skandha. Is that what you were asking?

Student: Yes, thank you. I wondered about the observer.

Geshe la: One could say the observer is the whole (all five aggregates or skandhas).