

# Study on a Correct Interpretation of the Buddhist Notion of "Skandhas"\*

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**Abstract**—The term “skandha”, one of the most crucial ones in Buddhist doctrine and Abhidharma philosophy, has not been interpreted adequately until now. A pseudo literal and misleading “aggregate” is still prevalent as its translation. The situation with the any of the five skandhas of the list is no better. In this article is given a brief outline of a conceptual interpretation of this notion as well as each of the five skandhas. Primarily, it is neither a “Buddhist tenet” nor even a Buddhist philosophical concept of the human being but a scheme of self-observation recommended for a Buddhist yogi on the path. It consists of two pairs of structural units, which correspond to two main missions of mind viz. cognition and behavior control. The fifth item is an integrating mind function of choosing an object field.

**Keywords**—Buddhist philosophy; Abhidharma; philosophical anthropology; translation; self-observation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The notion of five skandhas undoubtedly belongs to the very core of the Buddhist teaching. Nevertheless and strange enough, the scholars until now have refrained from a thorough elucidation of it. Predominantly, it is usually referred to by a rather inappropriate term “tenet” with an authoritative or even religious connotation, i.e. possibility of its being a rigorous and rational concept is tacitly rejected. Since as early as De la Vallée Poussin’s translation of Vasubandhu [1], [2] until recent works of J. Hopkins [3] or V. Androsof [4], the word “skandha” is usually rendered in English (and European languages) by a vague, quite inexact “aggregate”, “multitude” or something similar, as in the Russian translation of the Abhidharmakośa, “group” [5]. The only possible substantiation of it in the classical Buddhist literature seems to be found in this very text, viz. Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośa I.20. rāśy (āyadvāragotr) ārthāḥ skandhā (yatanadhātava) ḥ [6] “the [word] ‘skandha’ has the sense of ‘heap’”. But we are not justified to naively take into account this literal translation. In his brief explanation, aimed to educate monastic students who were familiar with similar semantic techniques, the Buddhist scholar certainly resorted to the exegetical approach that was already practiced even before him but was theoretically explained only some decades later by another eminent Buddhist thinker, viz. Dīnāga, in the latter’s apohavāda

theory. According to it, a word usage in a meaningful expression does not denote any positive individual entity or general notion but, on the contrary, excludes irrelevant meanings. It is just the case here. Vasubandhu implies that such established and most often used meanings of the word “skandha” as (1) “the shoulder”, (2) “the body”, (3) “the trunk or stem of a tree”, (4) “branch or large bough”, (7) “a division or detachment of an army” &c. are not meant literally in the language of the Buddhist sutras (The enumeration of English meanings here follows Apte’s Dictionary [7]. The sequence of enumeration in the Böhrtlingk’s Sanskrit-German Dictionary is almost the same, [8]); rather, the meaning (8) “a troop, multitude, group”, which is not at all the most common, is to be borne in mind. We have to add some lexicographical remarks. Firstly, the word rāśi “heap, mass”, by the means of which Vasubandhu explains “skandha”, is to be understood here in a double sense, both as a heap obtained as a result of a partition of an encompassing wholeness as well a multitude comprising many components. Secondly, the meanings (1) “the shoulder”, (3-4) “stem with boughs”, dismissed as literal ones, imply one and the same metaphor. In a shape which at a remote distance was seen initially as something uniform, an observer is able to discern at a closer distance its primary partition, as shoulders in a human figure or first boughs visually seceding from a trunk. It is surely also the case with the Buddhist term coined in the sutras: previously a seemingly undifferentiated “individual” or “person” is to be grasped as a structure comprising five constituents, skandhas. Skandha, therefore, is “constituent” or a “structural unit”, non-necessarily simple, maybe consisting of subunits.

## II. SKANDHA AS A CONCEPT

But the conceptual problem is thereby no more than partially stated. The scholar has to raise the following questions.

- What type of knowledge does this term convey?
- Whom is it addressed to?
- What purpose is it supposed to serve?

First, if a researcher is reluctant to characterize 5 skandhas negatively as a tenet, this notion is by default understood by him as conveying the Buddhist theory of the

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human condition, i.e. as a part of a philosophical anthropology or even applicable by the Buddhist authors to all other *sattvas* (*saṃsāra* denizens). This interpretation may be sometimes partially true to textual facts but misses the very core of this concept. The Western scholar is too accustomed to the Western notion of theory and readily ascribes a theoretical value to the Buddhist tradition, although the latter is, on the contrary, fundamentally not a theoretical, but a methodological one. Perhaps the most striking example was provided by Th. Stcherbatsky, the founder of the old St. Petersburg (Leningrad) school of Buddhist studies. He believed to have discovered in the *Abhidharma* treatises an outstanding ontological pluralism and even an attempt to enumerate and compile an exhaustive list all elements of being [cf. 9]. The eminent scholar committed an impressive conceptual error, because as a matter of fact the Buddhist authors had systematized only the *dharma*s mentioned in the *sūtras* but by no means all *dharma*s (e.g. astonishment or the sense of grievance are undeniably *dharma*s according to *Abhidharma* definition of the *dharma* notion. But they were left unmentioned by the Buddha, therefore they are non-included in any of *Abhidharma* lists). These thinkers had no aim to develop an exhaustive and systematic ontology as the latter would have contradicted the Buddha's words and intention.

Our answer of the first question is as follows. Initially, the *pendad* of *skandhas* is not an anthropological theory, but is a scheme of self-observation not readily applicable to other persons for the simplest reason: neither sensations nor thoughts of other persons and living beings are given to any of us directly, we are irrevocably confined within ourselves (according to Leibnitz, "monads have no windows"). Still, partially it can be comprehended in a wider sense, as referring to other possible Buddhist practitioners as well and finally, metaphorically and far less justified, also to non-practitioners. It is well known that all Buddhist philosophical schools splitted the reality (*satya*) into two layers, namely (a) the conventional or superficial (*sāṃketika* or *saṃvṛti*) and (b) the ultimate (*pāramārthika*). All of them, further, retained a realistic attitude within the scope of conventional reality. Therefore, for them it was acceptable to conventionally speak about some other's *skandhas* because the differences between persons are negligible in comparison with their fundamental similarity. Two practicing Buddhist yogis who are both engaged in self-observation according to this scheme could find it helpful to discuss their results. But it has to be stressed that such a usage of the *skandha* notion is secondary and makes no sense apart and without the self-observation.

Second, this knowledge was addressed to Buddhist *śrāvaka*s in the strictest sense, i.e. the persons who in their striving to end the individual *saṃsāra* had already attained at least the level of *śrotaāpanna* ("the one who has entered the stream") and thereby had reached *darśanamārga* ("the path of direct seeing") and become *ārya*s. Indeed, the attainment of this level is characterized both in the *sūtras* and in *Abhidharma* treatises as an overcoming of three hindrances, one of them being called *satkāya-dṛṣṭi*. This latter is explained as a subliminal trend to appropriate different aspects of one's

factuality according to one of the four patterns, namely those of identity, ownership, finding oneself in it or, on the contrary, finding it in oneself. E.g. a *saṃsāric* person can experience himself as being (i.e. identical with) 'these' thoughts or consciousness, as having 'these' feelings, as dwelling in 'this' body &c. This trend results in dynamical maintenance of *upādāna-skandhas*, 'constituents of grasping'. It may be also aptly called a habitual and arbitrary reification of the self-image and an essentialist bias. The attainment of the *ārya* level puts an end to this process of the perpetuation of *saṃsāra*. Due to accomplished dismissal of the grasping, an *ārya* practitioner obtains an initial ability to observe and understand oneself in terms of processes instead of fixed entities. In other words, he can proceed to use the *skandha* scheme.

Third, any personal systematic engagement in self-observation is necessarily transforming the observer. The *skandha* scheme was designed as helpful for the Buddhist practice with its aim to eradicate the existential unsatisfactoriness (*duḥkha*) and thereby to liberate oneself from *saṃsāra*. As soon as this aim is achieved, there remains no more need in *skandhas* as a scheme of yogi's activity. That's why it is asserted not only in *Mahāyāna* texts, but no less it *Abhidharma* philosophy, that the Buddha is not characterized by *skandhas*: he simply does not use thus method any more. On the contrary, a theoretical (= non-methodological) view according to which *skandhas* are presumably some objects, viz. five real partitions of a conventional "individual", makes this claim of the Buddhist texts either mystical or absurd.

The achieved result of *skandha* practice is their final transformation into another *pendad*, the so-called "clean (or non-defiled) constituents" (*śuddha skandha*).

### III. THE IMMANENT STRUCTURE OF SKANDHAS AS A FIVEFOLD CONCEPT

The relevant questions concerning this further elaboration are as follows

How are to be (a) understood (it is the main task of the scholar) and (b) translated (if a translation by a single word if possible) all the technical terms which denote the *skandhas* #1 – #5? Why are there exactly five *skandhas*, but not e.g. four or six? What is the inner conceptual structure of this *pendad*, i.e. what kind of semantical oppositions (These two questions concern interrelated aspects of one and the same object)?

The *skandha* #1 *rūpa* has been always translated as "matter", which is unacceptable and misleading. (a) The concept of matter along with that of form was introduced by Aristotle in order to conceptualize the human productive activity, as e. g. manufacturing of a wooden table. But this problem is irrelevant for Buddhist philosophers. (b) This very term *rūpa* is in other Buddhist contexts translated as 'form'. The perplexity of European readers could hardly be imagined. (c) If the term 'matter' is to understood according to Locke's problematics of primary and secondary qualities of things in the outer world, it would have seemed a bit less inappropriate. But the Locke's primary qualities (extension,

shape, movement &c) have nothing in common with the fundamental varieties of Buddhist rūpa (viz. (a) 5 domains of sensory experience and (b) 5 organs of senses).

Actually, rūpa is nothing else than (a) sensory data perceived and experienced (by means of a (b) rūpa as a sense faculty) by a person as being "there", "not in me" and as something to be understood or made sense of. In a way, it could be called "raw material for recognizing or understanding". The Buddhist concern was always remained a phenomenological one. The Buddhist yogis were engaged in a practice of observation, of witnessing the processes of perception as an emergence of sense out of raw sensory data. They constantly asked themselves: "It seems to me that I see (hear &c) this object. But what is really seen in it? I.e. what is passively perceived in the sense of not being actively constructed or reproduced from the memory by my mind the activity of which remains partially unnoticed by my attention?" The answer to this question consists always in a sample of rūpa as it is understood by a yogi observer according to his level of sophistication. In the course of training, the yogi gradually discovers all or almost all of the sensory content which he previously ascribed to rūpa belongs to his interpretation and recognition.

The skandha #3 saṃjñā, translated in [2] as "aggregate of ideas" and in [5] as "conceptual group", encompasses the results of the sense-recognition process. It can be named "the content of consciousness". The Buddhist authors of Dīnāga school pointed out that in every case it can be associated with a verbal expression, but this indication is not indispensable as the very Sanskrit word "saṃjñā" conveys a double meaning of an act of consciousness and of verbalization. We explain this skandha as "events of conscious recognition together with their content apt to be expressed in words".

#1 and #3 constitute a pair of opposites. It comprises the elementary cognitive activity as recognition and orientation it the outer world. More complex mental events as understanding something new, rational thinking &c were not regarded by Buddhist thinkers and yogis as occurring in every moment of consciousness and are therefore not included in the scheme.

This mutual complementarity of rūpa and saṃjñā is not discussed in Abhidharma literature in detail. These texts presupposed rather active readers who were ready to practice and witness the results individually and independently instead of acquiring objectified abstract average knowledge. But this complementarity is clearly visible in Buddhist tantric drawings of a later epoch. The groups of five and most central positions in a tantric maṇḍala represent a conceptual structure which is isomorphic to the skandha pentad. It is depicted as a cross. On the vertical axis, the lower end corresponds to rūpa and the upper one to saṃjñā. The graphical opposition represents the semantical one. The other opposition is that between #2 and #4 on the horizontal axis. Its semantical equivalent is the opposition of passivity and activity. We remind the reader that neither the first nor the second are such "by themselves" or "by their intrinsic nature". Something, i.e. some aspects of the observer's being

which are noticed by him during his practice of "self"-observation are immediately found by him as passive or active. No one except of him is in a position to be able to doubt the validity of his impressions. However, the prolonged practice gradually transforms the yogi. His sophistication increases, and after a while (e.g. some weeks or months) he may reconsider his former impression as imprecise or naive.

In Western translations, the #2 vedanā was rendered as "sensations" in [2] and "sensitivity" in [5]. Although this equivalent it not so fundamentally misleading as was the case with #1, it is no more than passable. By this rendering it is tacitly presupposed that vedanā is a kind of mental event which can be noticed and pointed out objectively. This view is incompatible with the Buddhist approach. One of two main lexicographical meanings of vedanā which is relevant here is experience (anubhava); to be precise, it refers and stresses the passive aspect, as in "he experienced tickling" (nobody is able to actively cause tickling in one's own body). Certainly, all sensations are experienced in this sense, but the passive side of one's interaction with the world is not confined to sensations. Almost every person who never practiced either Buddhist yogic 'self'-observation or even comparatively less ambitious Western methods of introspection would account of oneself as having (passively) experienced anger, love, anxiety, frustration &c. But these mental events are always theoretically considered not sensations but emotions, i.e. active or resulting in activity. The yogic observation process of this axis implements a similar shift of persons immediate evaluation of these psychic phenomena as with #1 and #3. The emotions are being progressively disclosed as no more belonging to passive experience, but as varieties of active behavior. As soon as they are being recognized in this quality by a yogi he acquires the ability to control them. Outbursts of anger, desperate love and other uncomfortable mental events cease to 'occur' to him. The closer the completion of this process of discovering and mastering inner activity, the less is still evaluated as passive i.e. experienced (anubhava). On the penultimate stage, only purely physical pain and pleasure remain something "passive". All emotions as well as intellectual factors of mental life, e.g. events of memory, imagination, understanding, thinking have already been transformed in their mode of facticity into active elements belonging to skandha #4 saṃskāra.

The conceptual structure of the skandha pentad consists of two pairs of opposites and a final #5 vijñāna. The usual translation of this term as "consciousness" is no less inadequate than the rendering of #1 rūpa as "matter". According to the Buddhist causation formula which consists of 12 members, vijñāna, besides of its being the fifth skandha, is the third member of this chain and constitutes the event of transition from a previous life into the very first moment of the present life. In the case of a beginning of a human life, it is the first moment of conception, the entering into the maternal womb. To find in this moment something like European "consciousness" means to distort the language and to prevent any understanding. The Buddhist concept of vijñāna has no European counterpart. This kind of mental

event is theoretically considered by Buddhist thinkers and practically observed by accomplished Buddhist practitioners of phenomenology, yogis, as a necessary precondition of all other mental events. In order to make sense (#3) of the sensory data (#1), in order to experience, say, a visual or an auditory sensation as pleasant or unpleasant (#2), in order to generate an emotional and / or intellectual response (#4), the mind has either to switch involuntarily or voluntarily to another sensory channel, i.e. from hearing to smelling or from beholding to listening, or to maintain the focus of attention on the same channel despite a detracting intervention from another channel. This act of choosing a sensory channel is called *vijñāna*. It is essential for any further experience of an object but is not itself a part of such an experience. To see something in the visual field, it is mandatory to switch to it. The visual field is a necessary condition of seeing some object within its boundaries in it. Therefore, the visual field is not visible. Similarly, *vijñāna* is not an experience of an object but, to use the Kantian term, a transcendental condition. It is transcendental choice. This is *vijñāna*'s permanent characteristic. In the situation of a transition from a life to life, *vijñāna* is no less an event of choosing, although not of a sense field, but of the world of the immediate next life.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The pentad of skandhas is a strict methodological concept peculiar to the Buddhist philosophy and the corresponding yogic practice. It is a consistent method of meditational training aiming to achieve the Buddhist goal of emancipation.

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