

# ***The Things Called ‘The Five Khandhas’***

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

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*In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhadāsa gave regular lectures during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from [www.suanmokkh.org](http://www.suanmokkh.org) and [www.bia.or.th](http://www.bia.or.th). The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok ([suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com](mailto:suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com)).*

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The last two days we have spoken about the burden of this thing we call ‘life.’ We’ve been speaking about this in order that you will understand what this burden is or what our problem is. And if you truly understand it, then you will be able to let go of it – toss it away – and be free of it.

Now we would like to begin talking about the things on which this burden is established – the things on which this problem grows. This means that we will be speaking about the *pañca-khandha* which means the ‘five groups of clinging’ or the ‘five aggregates of clinging.’ These are five categories of things which we attach to.

These five *khandhas* are what make up life. The five khandhas cover everything that makes up life. There is nothing that happens in life which does not somehow involve one of these khandhas. So when we speak of the five khandhas – the five groups of clinging – we’re talking about all aspects, every aspect, of human life.

Now when we speak about these five khandhas and about the various things which are related to them – which are associated with the five khandhas – then we in effect talk about everything that Buddhism has to say. If we study these five khandhas completely, fully, in every aspect – both the khandhas and everything involved with them – then we will have studied all of Buddhism. There is nothing

in Buddhism which isn't, in one way or another, involved with the five khandhas. So talking about and studying and investigating and observing the five khandhas means that we are studying all aspects of what it means to be a human being.

Something surprising about the five khandhas is that it seems that nobody is really interested in them. Nobody really bothers to pay much attention to them. There're not exactly the most entertaining subject there is around. It's not a kind of topic that brings out lots of laughs and excitement in listeners.

Even in Thailand – which is supposed to be a devout Buddhist country – nobody really pays much attention to the five khandhas. Or when they do – when Thais study the khandhas – they only study it as a kind of ceremony. They say a few chants about them and leave it at that. Or maybe they've got some books – some theoretical explanations of the khandhas – and they go and read these books, memorize them, discuss them, maybe even go so far as to argue about it.

This is about as far as people ever go in studying the khandhas. They go no farther than a theoretical intellectual level. They don't bother to approach the khandhas scientifically. By scientifically we mean going into these things experientially – experimenting with them, not with some concept or idea, but with the things themselves. So to scientifically study, experiment with, and explore these things as they happen – dealing with the real things rather than some abstract notions about them . . .

What we propose to do is to begin to talk about the khandhas in a way that will help you to explore them scientifically, so that you can experience them – and through that experience they will be proved to you what they are and how they are – within your own minds.

After the Buddha was enlightened he began to teach. His first sermon was about the Four Noble Truths – the Noble Truth of *dukkha*, the Noble Truth of the cause of *dukkha* which is craving, the Noble Truth of the cessation of *dukkha* which is the cessation of craving, and the Noble Truth of the Path that leads to the cessation of *dukkha*. This is what the Buddha taught in his first sermon.

In his second sermon he talked about the five khandhas and taught that the five khandhas are not-self. Let me point out that when we say 'not-self,' in this context or any other context, we are not saying 'no self.' There's the one misunderstanding that there is a self and then there's the opposite misunderstanding that there is no self which people take to mean there is nothing. These are two opposing

misunderstandings. When we say ‘not-self’ we are taking a middle of the road position saying ‘there is this but it is not-self.’

So in the second sermon the Buddha discussed the five khandhas and explained that they are impermanent and not-self or not-soul. The first teaching was about The Four Noble Truths and then the second one was about these five khandhas. And through this teaching of the five khandhas, the listeners became enlightened beings or Arahants (perfected ones). And the Buddha went on and taught this more than anything else. The teaching of the five khandhas occurs more often than any other teaching in the Buddhist scriptures. And every time the Buddha is teaching that these five khandhas are impermanent and not a ‘soul.’

The five khandhas and the truths that they are impermanent and *anattā* are a teaching that we can take as the heart of Buddhism. This is the core teaching of Buddhism. Even in the Mahāyāna schools – those are the schools that appear in the northern parts of Asia such as China, Japan, Korea, Nepal, Tibet and parts of India . . . In these Mahāyāna schools where they have developed various teachings which aren’t found in the Theravāda or southern tradition . . . Even with all these additional teachings which occur in the Mahāyāna schools, nonetheless every *sutta* or discourse, no matter what topic it’s about – about some Bodhisattva or this or that – these discourses always end with a reference to the five khandhas being impermanent and not-soul.

So even in the Mahāyāna tradition which includes many many things which we don’t find in the Theravāda tradition, we find the core central teaching of the five khandhas being *anattā* (not-self). And so even though these two traditions in Buddhism – the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna – often go in completely opposite directions in some of the digressions and explanations and details, there’s still this one core teaching that holds both of these traditions together and . . . which is a common ground within all of Buddhism no matter what school or what external forms and ceremonies and rituals it takes on. At the heart of Buddhism – if it’s really Buddhism – there is always the teaching of the five khandhas being impermanent and not-soul.

The five khandhas are the basis of our misunderstanding. Through misunderstanding these five khandhas we take them to be an *attā* or the Sanskrit word *atman* or English ‘soul’ or ‘self.’ We take these five khandhas to be some sort of ‘soul’ through misunderstanding them.

This was going on long before the Buddha appeared in the world. This misunderstanding and attachment to the khandhas happened and had been happening for a long time before the Buddha. But then when the Buddha appeared in the world he saw that these five khandhas were not in fact a ‘self’ or a ‘soul.’ Rather they were anattā and then he taught this.

And so we need to study these and look into them to truly realize this fact that the five khandhas are not-soul. Until we realize this fact these khandhas are deceiving us. They’re playing tricks on us, conning us into thinking that they are a ‘self,’ some kind of ‘soul,’ attā or atman. So don’t let them deceive you. Don’t let them play their tricks on your mind. Observe them and scrutinize them until you see what they really are.

If you can remember the example we gave the other day about the child who kicks the chair out of anger . . . When the child bumped into the chair and there was the unpleasant sensation of pain in his leg . . . And then anger arose. Then there arose the illusion of attā – the illusion of a ‘soul’ within the mind of that child . . . ‘I am an I.’ ‘I am a self.’ This misunderstanding arose in the child’s mind. And with that misunderstanding then there also arose the miss-perception that the chair is also an attā – a ‘self,’ a ‘soul,’ some permanent, separate individual entity. And so there is the attā illusion of ‘I am an I.’ And then it is ‘my’ opponent.

So here we have this fundamental conflict arising already. Nobody taught this to the child. It happens in children even before they go to school. This is something that arises instinctually within the minds of sentient beings.

So this is how this attā is arising. And this is an example on the physical level of how we take something physical – a body, a chair – to be the ‘soul’ or ‘self.’ This is a topic which we must go into in greater detail in order for you to understand it completely.

Yesterday we mentioned that life is made up of two aspects: *nāma* and *rūpa* – ‘mind and body,’ or sometimes it’s translated ‘name and form’). *Nāma* and *rūpa* (mind and body) – the mental and physical aspects of life.

The physical aspect is not very complicated, but the *nāma* aspect is more complex. So we often divide it into four categories, giving us five categories – body and then four mental aspects.

The first mental aspect is *vedanā* (feeling) – the feeling group – which you ought to understand by now.

Then the second is the *saññā* group – perceptions and discriminations about this is red and this is white, this is tallness, shortness.

Then there is the *saṅkhāra* group – the mental conditioning, the thinking and proliferating and emotional aspect of the mind.<sup>1</sup>

And then there is the fourth mental aspect or the fifth khandha which is *viññāṇa*. Viññāṇa is the awareness of or knowing of the sense-stimuli – sights, sounds, smells, and so forth.

So we can look at life in these two aspects of mind and body, or in the five aspects of body, feeling, perceptions, thinking, and *viññāṇa* (the bare awareness of sense experience). This is all that life is made up of. Life is merely mind and body, or merely the five khandhas. So please take special interest in these things if you would like to understand what life is made up of.

Let's begin our study with the fetus which we all once were in the mother's womb. And the fetus is born as an infant. Let's study the five khandhas as they arise in the infant.

The young infant begins to receive sense-stimuli from the world around it. Here we have then the sense-organs functioning and the sense-objects. This is *rūpa-khandha* (the body khandha). Then there are the *vedanā* arising towards these sensory-stimuli and sense-experiences. And so we have the *vedanā-khandha*. And then after that there are perceptions and discriminations about those sense-stimuli, the sense-objects and the sense-experience. And this is *saññā-khandha*. Then there is thinking about what is going on – ideas, opinions, emotions. This is *saṅkhāra-khandha*. And then involved in all this is the awareness of what is happening and the knowing of what is going on. This is *viññāṇa-khandha*.

In the womb the fetus is compounded – or made up of or there is the body-khandha already present – but it is not yet complete, it is not yet fully functioning. But after birth the body-khandha begins to function completely with the functioning of the sense-organs. And then the sense-organs are contacted by the sense-objects. And then there is *viññāṇa-khandha* arising when the sense-organs and sense-objects come into contact. So then there is the *viññāṇa-khandha*, the awareness or knowing of those sense contacts. This leads to the arising of *vedanā-khandha*, the various feelings of the mind – hot, feeling positive or negative or

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<sup>1</sup> When I mention emotional aspect of the mind, when I use the word 'mind' I'm including also what some people would call the 'heart.' [note by the translator]

uncertain about whatever sense-experience is occurring. And then *saññā-khandha*, the perceptions of the marks and signs of that experience, noting various aspects of the experience. And then lastly, *sañkhāra-khandha* – the thinking about it.

This is how the five *khandhas* come into being and begin to function fully at some time soon after birth. They incompletely existed even before birth. But after birth they begin to work fully. And then there are these five *khandhas* doing their thing. And this is what we call ‘life.’ These are the five *khandhas* or life – of life – or we can say that life is the five *khandhas*.

In the womb the *sañkhāra-khandha* (thinking group) of the infant is probably not very complete or perfect. And so for this reason it’s probably not possible for the infant to think. And without this ability to think, the concept or feeling of ‘I’ – of ‘self’ – cannot arise.

So in the womb the fetus probably has no illusion about an ‘I.’ But after birth there arises various experiences which the infant either likes or dislikes – is satisfied with or dissatisfied with – and because of these, the arising of these *vedanās* . . . Then there is the . . . this becomes the illusion that ‘I am satisfied.’ ‘I like this.’ ‘I dislike that.’ And here we have the arising of the illusion of a ‘soul’ or an ‘I.’ This is the *sañkhāra-khandha*. It begins to function completely sometime after birth and it’s rooted in this feeling – usually the pleasant feelings – towards various sense-experience.

And so in this way the idea of a ‘self’ is formed. This is how the burden of life comes into being through the full functioning of the five *khandhas* – the burden of life and all the problems that come with it.

Once the ‘I’ arises – this concept of ‘soul’ – this is followed very soon by selfishness where one thinks, speaks, and acts for one’s own sake – for the sake of the ‘self’ – rather than for the sake of what is right and correct. And thus all our problems – all the dangers and harms – that takes place in the world starts to spin round and round through the arising of this ‘I.’

So this is the burden of life. If you study these five *khandhas* and how they work, then you will begin to see how the ‘I’ – how the ‘soul’ – illusion arises. And then you will maybe be able to do something about it.

Let’s summarize what we’ve said so far with this. Life are the five *khandhas* and their activity. Life is merely these five *khandhas* and their behavior – their activity – and nothing else. This is all that life is made up of.

The rain is telling us to end today's talk and so we will finish. We will stop today on this note and will continue on a later date.

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