

Am I my five khaṇḍhas?

Dhammānupassanā Series

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One day, the awakened nun Vajirā Bhikkhunī, having returned from Savatthi with her daily alms, having eaten and having settled down in the Blind Men's Grove for the day's abiding, was confronted by the infamous Māra, who tried to disrupt her *samādhī* by raising a thorny philosophical question: What is a living being (*satta*)? Her famous answer surprised and frustrated the Evil One:

Just as, with an assemblage of parts,
The word “chariot” is used,
So, when aggregates are present,
There's the convention “a living being.” (SN 5.10)

Several centuries later, as recorded in the *Questions of Milinda*, the wise Buddhist monk Nāgasena won his first debate with the Bactrian Greek king Milinda by drawing on Vajirā's analysis, pointing out that just as the king's chariot is nei-



ther axle, nor wheels, nor chassis, nor reins, nor yoke, nor something apart from them, Nāgasena is neither nails, nor teeth, nor skin or nor other parts of the body, nor any of the aggregates, nor something apart from them. No chariot can be found, no Nāgasena can be found, yet by convention we say “chariot” and “Nāgasena.”

The five *aggregates* – in Pali *khaṇḍha* or in Sanskrit *skhaṇḍha* – are *form* (*rūpa*), *feeling* (*vedanā*), *perception* (*saññā*), *fabrications* (*saṅkhārā*) and *consciousness* (*viññāṇa*), products of cognitive analysis, as we will see. In later Buddhist thought Vajirā's and Nāgasena's analysis of the unsubstantiality of concepts like “chariot” and “living being” was taken, not as laying bare the unsubstantiality of concepts, but as an attempt to define these very concepts. Even in modern discourse, the five khaṇḍhas are more of-

ten than not defined as the five constituents of the person or psychophysical organism and sometimes translated “the five personality factors,” rather than “the five aggregates.”

I wish to consider herewith: Are you or I five aggregates? And if so, are we *really* five aggregates, or only as a matter of linguistic convention?

What are the five *khaṇḍhas*, exactly?

The five *khaṇḍhas*, as a matter of doctrine, appear to have a precedent in no pre-Buddhist tradition.¹ However, tradition tells us that the Buddha referred to this concept in his very first discourse, “The Turning of the Wheel,” in explaining the first noble truth as follows:

Birth is painful, aging is painful, illness is painful, death is painful; sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, unhappiness and distress are painful; union with what is disliked is painful; separation from what is liked is painful; not to get what one wants is painful; in brief, the five aggregates of attachment. (SN 56.11)

Its occurrence here must have been puzzling for anyone not already familiar with the concept. I suspect that either the expression *was*, in fact, already in common discourse, or a later redactor projected what had later become a fundamental concept in the Buddha's teachings back into this early discourse. What we can infer from this first mention is that the five aggregates seem to encompass a wide swath of human experience and that they become a problem when attachment to them arises.

Given the foregoing analogy of a being and a chariot, we might expect each of the *khaṇḍhas* to be a thing, a concrete part like an axle, a wheel, a chassis or a yoke, that can be assembled together to produce “me.” Again, the *khaṇḍhas* in English and Pali are:

<u>aggregate</u>	<u>khaṇḍha</u>
form	rūpa
feeling	vedanā
perception	saññā

fabrications	saṅkhārā
consciousness	viññāṇa

The names indicate cognitive capabilities. This might suggest that maybe the *khaṇḍhas* are an array of mental *faculties*, functional units charged with interpreting the world. However, keep in mind that a *khaṇḍha* itself is an aggregate, that is, a heap, a collection, an assembly, a pile or a bundle. *Saññā*, for instance, cannot be a single something that perceives, but must rather be the heap, or stream, of perceptions produced by such an alleged perceiver, each of which arises, undergoes change and ceases. This makes sense in terms of the way we are instructed to contemplate the *khaṇḍhas*:

Whatever kinds of form[...] there is, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far and near, a *bhikkhu* inspects it, investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. (SN 22.95)

This passage is a pericope, a fixed formula repeated with slight variations. The suttas are full of pericopes. In this passage the same formula is then repeated four times, but each time replacing “form” with one of the other *khaṇḍhas*. I will use the notation “form[...]” to indicate substitution of each of the five *khaṇḍhas* in turn, starting with “form,” in a pericope.

Consciousness, in particular, has been vulnerable in other contexts to interpretation as a fixed functional thing, rather than as a stream of comings and goings. One day the Buddha summoned the monk Sāti, who was reported to have a pernicious view, and stated his view as follows:

“As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another.”

“What is that consciousness, Sāti?”

“Venerable sir, it is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions.”

“Misguided man, to whom have you ever known

me to teach the Dhamma in that way? Misguided man, have I not stated in many ways consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness? (MN 38)

Consciousness manifests contingently, not as a fixed thing. If we take up the *khaṇḍhas* as topics of practice, it is important to be clear what we are supposed to look for; few teachers seem to do this. If we eat bread, we eat a morsel at a time, not all bread and not the bakery. It is in the morsel that we experience taste and texture. Likewise we experience perception and the rest one morsel at a time as phenomena that arise contingently. Let me try out, just for the time being, new names that avoid the ambiguity between mental faculties and their products inherent in the conventional name.

form	appearances
feeling	valuations
perception	features
fabrications	structures
consciousness	configurations

The *khaṇḍhas* represent different facets of the world of increasing depth or complexity. Think of these as building layers of physical reality, unfolding progressively: colors and shapes, affective tones, things and qualities, structural relations among things and complex configurations of things and relations, as they arise in our experience interdependently. Let's discuss each of these *khaṇḍhas* briefly in turn:

form. The Pali word *rūpa* means “form,” “shape” or “experience,” and therefore has to do with the physical world as it arises in experience.² “Body” or “matter” would be a poor translation, though it is a common assumption by students of the Dhamma that form refers in this context to the physical body as part of the “personality.” However, this would give us no way to refer to the sensual facets of insentient objects in experience, such as our chariot, objects that are not our body or someone else's body.³ Moreover, as will soon be apparent, a body is constituted of all the *khaṇḍhas*.

feeling. This is defined as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral and can be thought of as interest. This is the single affective factor among the *khaṇḍhas*. Although the other *khaṇḍhas* most typically are aspects of physicality, the valuation that tags appearances, characteristics, structures and configurations plays a critical role in conditioning consciousness and the other factors.

perception. This manifests as specific colors, recognizable shapes and other features of physical objects, at the level of words or concepts. An appearance can manifest as a face, for instance, or as a tree or as a dog, or as my dog, or as a chariot. Experientially it is here that the designation “chariot” or “living being” arises. Here we begin to see its insubstantiality. For instance, “chariot” might arise quite readily from a perception of a sound or motion.

fabrications. Structures are composites, things made out of pieces. From the parts, the whole emerges, for instance, from eyes and mouth, a face emerges, from conditions and goal a plan emerges. From sound and motion a chariot emerges. From attachment identification arises. Fabrications represent choices of interpretation or execution, and so are volitional or karmic in nature. This lends particular importance to fabrications, since this is where we learn to make better choices. Other *khaṇḍhas* are actually kinds of structures at different levels of complexity.

consciousness. An arising of consciousness can be far reaching in its discernment, insight, imagination and abstraction, generally pointing to something complex far beyond itself – notice that we are always conscious *of* something –, painting a picture of a reality often bordering on fantasy. The Buddha compares consciousness to a magic show.⁴ It can see entire objects when only a tail or a tail fin is visible to perception, or tell us that objects observed at different times from different angles are the same object. It arises as an objective world “out there,” consisting of things and people, and convinces us that it is all real. It can even take shapes and colors flashing on a video screen and transplant us into a world of the remote past, as in a western movie, or into the future, as in a science fiction movie, and make that world seem real. None of the other *khaṇḍhas* exists without consciousness⁵ – we wouldn't know about them if they did.

Our experience is composed from the *khaṇḍhas*, which present an unfolding of the experienced world, accumulating different facets of reality, level by level, element by element. The Buddha describes the process with a metaphor:

“Suppose, bhikkhus, an artist or a painter, using dye or lac or turmeric or indigo or crimson, would create the figure of a man or a woman complete in all its features on a well-polished plank or wall or canvas. So too, when the uninstructed worldling produces anything, it is only form that he produces, only feeling that he produces, only perception that he produces, only fabrications that he produces, only consciousness that he produces.” (SN 22.100)

The objects that arise layer by layer are insubstantial and composed of insubstantial elements, and therefore the objects are insubstantial. The Buddha makes the following analogies:

form	foam
feeling	a bubble
perception	a mirage
fabrications	a plantain tree (with no discernible core)
consciousness	a magic show



For each, he says, “it would appear to [the observer] to be void, hollow, insubstantial.”⁶ This is why a chariot or a living being, or person, are insubstantial, they are fabricated in our experiential world from insubstantial elements.

We live in two worlds, an internal (*ajjhata*) subjective world of direct experience, and an external (*bahiddhā*) objective world which we imagine to exist with or without us. *Khaṇḍhas* pertain to the internal world and only to the internal world. When Ven. Varijā says, “When the aggregates are present, there's the convention 'a living being',” she can only be

referring to the composition of the being within internal experience. When she breaks down the chariot into its component parts, she is speaking externally.⁷ In fact, the chariot is found in both worlds. In the external world it is constructed of wheels, chassis and so on. In the internal world it is painted of *khaṇḍhas*. Part of the subjective experience of the chariot is the conscious conviction that it also exists in the external world.

It is critical that we recognize this distinction, for the Buddha prioritized the subjective world: It is the world in which suffering arises, it is the world in which we seek liberation; it is the world in which we immerse ourselves when we sit on the cushion, it is the world in which we awaken. Since this world is entirely of experience, the question, “What exists?” does not apply, only the question “What arises under what circumstances?” Investigation of the external world is ontological, investigation of the internal is epistemological. The Buddha gives us alternative ways to view the world of experience, each highlighting different aspects. The main alternative is the sixfold (sense) sphere,⁸ about which he spoke,

In the six the world has arisen,
In the six it holds concourse.
In the six it has woes. (SN 1.70)

How do we practice the five khaṇḍhas?

A doctrine is only as good as the practices it supports. The doctrine of the *khaṇḍhas* concerns our world of experience and the factors that arise in experience, which is to say *phenomena* (*dhammas*).⁹ It presents these as material for investigation and insight, on and off the cushion, specifically suited for the fourth foundation of mindfulness, *dhammānupassanā*, or contemplation of phenomena.

The qualities of our experiential world that come forward with the *khaṇḍhas* are its constructedness and its insubstantiality, for it is a fragile reality fabricated in small cognitive increments, cognitive morsels. The Buddha applies a common formula to approach investigation of the *khaṇḍhas*, that is, in terms of gratification, danger, and escape.

The *gratification* (*assāda*) of the *khaṇḍhas* is the pleasure

and joy dependent on *khañdhas*.

The *danger* (*ādīnava*) is that the *khañdhas* are impermanent, suffering and subject to change.

The *escape* (*nissaraṇa*) is the removal of desire and lust for the *khañdhas*.¹⁰

The first expresses where we begin our investigation, the second examines how the first creates problems for us in terms of the salvific goals of practice, and the third is where we move in our practice. The Buddha stated with regard to this formula,

“So long as I did not directly know the gratification, the danger and the escape in the case of the five aggregates of attachment, I did not claim to have awakened.” (SN 22.27)

Let me take these up in order.

Gratification. Our job here is to examine how pleasure and joy tend to come up around the *khañdhas* and moreover how these lead to attachment (*upādāna*), which in turn involves identification, appropriation and even the arising of pernicious views with regard to the *khañdhas*. Because the *khañdhas* really represented an unfolding of the experienced world, an accrual of different facets of reality, we might notice in our practice at which point in an unfolding experiences we crave or attach. For instance, I may be attached to, and even identify with, my chariot. What aspects am I attached to, or do I identify with? If it is the shine of the chrome trimmings, my attachment centers on form; if the quality of the wooden parts, the length of the yoke or the diameter of the wheels then on perception; if the many uses I find in my chariot and the prestige I gain by appearing on the byways and crossroads in it, then on consciousness. We may discover that all of these play a role.

One of the functions of bringing such contemplations onto the cushion is that, as the mind stills, the experienced world folds up again, in particular retreating from consciousness, fabrications, perception, and so on, and, with that, the craving, attachment, identification and appropriation that accompany them. We begin to notice as the mind stills, the world undergoes a noticeable shift. This highlights the unsubstantiality of the *khañdhas*.

An oft-repeated formula shows how identification or appropriation occur within attachment.

“The uninstructed worldling sees form[...] as self, self as possessing form[...], self as in form[...], self as in form [...].” (SN 22.1, etc.)

Khāṇḍhas evoke attachments. The intersection of attachment and the *khāṇḍhas* is called the *aggregates of attachment* or aggregates subject to attachment (*upādānak-khāṇḍha*), a very important concept in the Buddha's teaching. The nun Dhammadinna equated identity (*sakkāya*), one's sense of self, exactly with the five aggregates of attachment (MN 44). Basically, you are what you attach to. But moreover, it is from attachment that specific *views* about identity – such as, “this I am, this is mine, this is my self” – arise (SN 24.2).

Danger. Contemplating the five aggregates of attachment, we ask, What is the problem here? Well, to begin with, the five aggregates of attachment are misery (SN 22.31), “form is burning, feeling is burning, perception is burning, fabrications are burning, consciousness is burning” (SN 22.61). What we attach to we want to be permanent, so when we discover it is impermanent we have a problem.

“The uninstructed worldling regards form[...] thus: 'this is mine, this I am, this is my self.' That form[...] of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of form [...], there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair.” (SN 22.8)

Impermanence is why craving leads to suffering. I often advise students that if they acquire a new chariot, the best thing they can do for themselves is to take out a hammer and put a few dents in it. Get it over with. Otherwise they will make themselves miserable in anticipation before the first dent even occurs. Granted, they will make themselves miserable later in any case. Moreover, an uninstructed worldling who identifies with or appropriates forms, feeling, perceptions, fabrications or instances of consciousness is tethered to *samsara*, like a dog leashed to a pole. (SN 22.98)

Escape. The escape is renunciation, loosening the grip of attachment to me and mine. Just as kids lose their lust and desire for a sandcastle – also insubstantial and yet initially a locus of great significance and attachment – then destroy and scatter it, so we

must destroy our lust and desire for the *khañdhas* and destroy and scatter what we have built (SN 23.2). This metaphor is directly enacted by Tibetan monks who painstakingly construct a mandala of colored sand over many days, then sweep it away at once upon completion. The scattering begins with the contemplation of the danger of the aggregates:



“Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu sees as impermanent form[...] which is actually impermanent: that is his right view. Seeing rightly, he experiences revulsion. With the destruction of delight comes the destruction of lust; with the destruction of lust

comes the destruction of delight. With the destruction of delight and lust the mind is liberated and is said to be well liberated.” (SN 22. 51)

Most of the practices of the *Khañdhasamyutta* involve prying up the identification with the *khañdhas*. These are recurring refrains:

“This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”

“He does not consider form[...] as self, or self as possessing form [...], or form[...] as in self, or self as in form[...].”

Sometimes it drills down into more detailed analyses:

“*Bhikkhus*, form[...] is nonself. For if, *bhikkhus*, form [...] were self, this form[...] would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form[...]: 'Let my form [...] be this; let my form[...] not be thus.'” (SN 22.59)

Understanding gratification, danger and escape, we hope for liberation:

“If, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu's* mind has become dispassionate towards form[...], it is liberated from the taints by non-attachment. By being liberated, it is steady; by being steady, it is content; by being content, he is not agitated. Being unagitated, he personally attains *Nibbāna*. He under-

stands: 'Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.'" (SN 22.45)

The practices around the *khaṇḍhas* and the *upādānak-khaṇḍhas* are clearly very prominent in the discourses of the Buddha. We should note that there is no mention in the suttas at all of any practice of investigating the person by decomposing the person into five parts.¹¹ That is not the role of the *khaṇḍhas* in the Buddha's teaching. Quite the opposite: the practice is to deny the relationship of the *khaṇḍhas* to the self.

Am I my five khaṇḍhas?

The quick answer is: Yes, But! ... Let's consider how a person, me, arises in your experiential world. First certain colors and shapes arise, largely maroon in color. A sense of foreboding ensues. The features arise "monk," "shaveling," then the discernment "worthy of offerings" The features arise "wire-rimmed glasses," "wry grin" and finally "Bhikkhu Cintita," then the discernment "maybe not so worthy of offerings." At some point in this process you are convinced that I really exist out there in the external world, independent of your experience of me. In this way you fabricate me and furthermore take this insubstantial fabrication as real. I am in your experiential world fabricated entirely of five *khaṇḍhas*. However, I am no different in this sense from the book you left lying on your table, nor your chariot, for they are fabricated as well of five *khaṇḍhas*. So there is no reason, so far, to call the *khaṇḍhas* "personality factors"; they are "everything factors."

Nonetheless, lest the reader be disappointed with this conclusion, there is another and very interesting way I might be my five *khaṇḍhas*: I have a *flip side*, which your book and your chariot do not. You will discern that I am much like you, and that just as you live in an internal world of experience, I must similarly live in an internal world of experience, composed of five *khaṇḍhas*, in which objects of my experience will arise, including you. Although once again they are not "personality factors" per se, we can at least say that personhood, as conventionally understood, relies on having a flip side born of *khaṇḍhas*.

Rohitassa in a previous life had been a deva who could travel at astonishing speed. He had tried, by running for a hundred years, to reach the end of the world where he expected to encounter liberation, but without success. In this life he asked of the Buddha whether this quest was even possible. The Buddha replied,



“I say, friend, that by traveling one cannot know, see or reach that end of the world where one is not born, does not grow old and die, does not pass away and get reborn. Yet I say that without having reached the end of the world there is no making an end of suffering. It is in this fathom-long living body endowed with perception and mind that I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the way leading to the cessation of the world.” (AN 4.45)

The Buddha's enigmatic statement is resolved when we realize he has shifted his perspective from the conventional person to the flip-side of the person, where we have woes, where we practice and where we attain liberation. Conventionally, we expect a person to be comprised of a body and a flipside, The common phrase *saviññānako kāyo*, body with its consciousness, seems to mean the same thing.¹² Notice that Nāgasena also describes a person with physical features prior to mention of *khāṇḍhas*.

The *khāṇḍhas* answer the question, How do we experience? The *khāṇḍhas* provide insight into the constructed nature of the experiential world. We learn that if we imagine a personal identity this causes us problems, so our practice is to remind ourselves that the *khāṇḍhas* are *not* our selves. Vajirā's response to Māra was intended to emphasize the insubstantiality of that personal identity.

In early Buddhist history the *khāṇḍhas* were taken to answer another question, What is the person? The Buddha never attempted to answer this question.¹³ Those who have, unfortunately, have

generally been encouraged to offer an ontological answer in which the *khaṇḍhas* are our selves. This resulted in a history of thorny metaphysical speculation,¹⁴ eventuating in the idea of the “person” (S: *pudgala*, P: *puggala*) as a fully reified entity in the Pudgalavāda tradition.

As an afterthought, the understanding of the *khaṇḍhas* endorsed here allows us to gain insight into another puzzling issue. In the twelve links of dependent coarising, two of the early links are consciousness and name-and-form (*nāma-rūpa*) in a very tight relationship.¹⁵ Now, the factors that constitute name-and-form (form, feeling, perception, volition, contact, attention) plus consciousness come very close to the five *khaṇḍhas*. Let us therefore take them as roughly equivalently as modeling our experiential world. Now, the puzzling issue involves this passage:

“If consciousness were not to descend into the mother's womb, would name-and-form take shape in the womb?” “No, Lord.”

“If the consciousness of a young boy or girl were to be cut off, would name-and-form grow up, develop and reach maturity?” “No, Lord.” (DN 15)

This passage has been used to justify a biological interpretation of a large segment of the twelve links for centuries, whereby name-and-form is equated with the person, or psychophysical organism, that acquires or sustains consciousness, much like the five *khaṇḍhas* have generally been assumed to define the person.¹⁶ However, there are several reasons why the biological interpretation cannot be right: First, the biological interpretation is speculative and rather uninteresting in itself, and provides no material for practice or insight. Second, the biological interpretation displaces a much more viable interpretation that lays bare the role of cognition in creating the subject-object duality upon which craving depends, and that does provide material for practice and insight.¹⁷ Finally, the role in biological conception of consciousness makes consciousness into something substantial that can move through space and enter the mother's womb in order to run and wander through the round of rebirths, which seems suspiciously similar to Sāti's pernicious view discussed earlier.¹⁸

The puzzle arises from confusing external and internal worlds. A person is clearly referred to twice in an objective sense, first as the occupant of the womb and then as the boy or girl. However, the consciousness and the name-and-form, like the *khaṇḍhas*, must refer to the flip side of the person, to the person's internal world, much as in the teaching to Rohitassa discussed above. This passage thereby serves to correlate processes in the internal world with external events as a means of demonstrating a causal relation between consciousness and name-and-form.

What is often missing in our understanding of the *khaṇḍhas* is an appreciation of the difference, articulated in the early discourses, between the external world and the internal world, or between the person and his flip-side. The *khaṇḍhas* belong strictly to the latter, where we have woes, and as such are material for contemplation of phenomena (*dhammānupassanā*).

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- 1 Hamilton (2000, 70).
- 2 Gethin (1986, 36).
- 3 Gethin (1985, 40).
- 4 Ñāṇānanda (1974), based on the Kālakārāma Sutta (SN 22.95), explores this metaphor.
- 5 See SN 22.53.
- 6 SN 22.95.
- 7 Hamilton (1996, 194) states, “There is no suggestion in the Sutta Pitaka that the Buddha had any concern for ontological matters. . . . We don’t find information concerning what we are comprised of, but only how we work.” Gethin (1986, 49) points out furthermore that this particular way of constituting the person as five *khaṇḍhas* would have no particular psychological or logical merit.
- 8 The main source for the six-fold sphere is *The Saḷāyatana Sutta* (MN 137), also the *Saḷāyatanaṣaṃyutta* (SN 35).
- 9 A phenomenon in western philosophy is an object as experienced by the senses, as opposed to a noumenon, which is an object as it exists independent of the senses.
- 10 This formula is repeated throughout the *Khaṇḍhasaṃyutta* (SN 22), for instance in SN 22.26, and in MN 108.
- 11 There is, by way of analogy, a practice of contemplating the body as being composed of thirty-two parts found in many suttas, such as the Sati-paṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10).
- 12 Harvey (1995, 116).
- 13 Thanissaro (2010).
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 For instance, see Ñāṇānanda (2015, vol. 2, 31-35).
- 16 On the biological interpretation see Bodhi (1995, 18).
- 17 Ñāṇānanda (2015), Cintita (2016).
- 18 The word commonly translated as “descends” in this passage can also mean “arises.”