Attachment: The Five Khandhā

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 47:30

Tonight I want to talk about the five khandha, a teaching often translated as the five aggregates of clinging. By now I am sure you are aware that clinging to our experience as "me" and "mine" causes suffering.

This is expressed in the second noble truth: that desire is the cause of suffering. Unless we can see desire as it arises, it generates a sense of self, and this newly created "me" devotes all my energy to trying to get more of the pleasure and get rid of the pain or distress. But this is stressful. In moments of equanimity, when we can let things arise and pass away, we get a taste of freedom, a glimpse of the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering.

All of the Buddha's teachings concern suffering and the end of suffering, but each time he gives us a slightly different perspective on this central theme. The better we get to know them all, the more choice we have in finding one to suit our circumstances. For example, the wheel of dependent origination focuses on the step-by-step process which ends up in dukkha. We notice these links when our attention is drawn into a momentary experience of one thing leading to another. By contrast, the teaching on the khandha focuses on what it is we are clinging to. It's like taking a cross-section through our experience at any one time. The wheel looks at detail to find out how we create suffering. The khandha looks more broadly to discover what we are clinging to.

The word khandha is usually translated as an aggregate, which means an amalgamation of many separate elements. Aggregate is not such a common word, but sounds good by comparison to another translation of khandha as a heap. It's not very flattering to think of ourselves scrabbling round in five heaps of stuff as we make our way through life, but maybe this is a poignant image for our predicament.

The first of these heaps consists of material form. The second of vedanā or feeling. The third is composed of our perceptions. The fourth is our habitual tendencies or saṅkhāra. And finally we have consciousness. These five heaps cover all of our experience in life apart from the experience of nibbāna. We cling to the khandha because we don't see their basic characteristics of anicca and anattā.

One metaphor which is often used to convey the true nature of anicca, dukkha, and anattā is that of free fall. Everything is slipping away at a great rate and you're completely out of control. There's nothing you can cling to. It's all disappearing too quickly. At first you're scared stiff because of the crash to earth you are anticipating, but in our fall into the reality of the three characteristics, the crash never comes. Bit by bit we learn to relax and enjoy the experience.

So now I'm asking you to stretch your imagination and think of your whole life as a long fall out of an aeroplane. Everything is slipping by at an alarming rate. Nothing gives any stability. You're spinning and tumbling out of control. You reach out in a vain effort to find anything that could slow things down.

Suppose there are various objects that offer hope. Falling through a flock of geese, you could clutch at a few legs. The birds get dragged downwards, but they slow your fall and even hold you steady for a while. Relief. But then the rest of the flock descends to rescue the tethered geese by pecking at you so that you have to let go. You land on the wing of a glider plane. This offers a few moments' bumpy ride, but your weight tips the plane over so you get ejected. Again and again you reach out for whatever will give you stability. These images represent our attempt to cling to the first khandha, material form.

If you were a very astute free faller, you would have noticed that you feel good when you're managing to cling on, and you would realize it's the feel-good you really want, and start wondering whether there are easier ways of getting that pleasure. Now you are intent on clinging to the second khandha, vedanā or feeling, as a means of coping with the reality of ultimate doom. You have found one way of getting a pleasant feeling from the temporary security offered by material form. But all that pecking from wild geese is no fun, and the bumpy rides are very bumpy, so you start looking around for other ways to help you feel good.

You notice that turning on your back helps. The sky looks much more stable than the fast approaching ground. Also, you come across a nice little heap of glasses and lenses that are falling to earth around you. Putting on rose-tinted spectacles certainly helps. And also looking through lenses that make the ground seem far away. All these allow you to change your perception of the situation. So now you're clinging to the third khandha, perception. You're choosing the perceptions of life that help you feel safe and secure.

But sometimes you can't find the right glasses, and you notice that certain thoughts and patterns of behaviour also help you cope. For example, roaring and shouting about how awful and unfair it is that you fell from the plane gives you a bit of a buzz. And luckily, for the first few years of your free fall, there's a kind mother figure falling to earth alongside you who never fails to respond with milk and biscuits. So now you're clinging to the fourth khandha, habitual behaviour, saṅkhāra. You're developing habits that give you a fleeting quick fix of pleasure.

But roaring and shouting gives you a headache, so as a last resort you turn to mindfulness. You learn to watch your experience without interfering. Things get peaceful. There's a soothing sense of simply being an observer, slightly aloof from the drama of your life. Now you are clinging to the last khandha, consciousness. Again, this gives that all-important hit of pleasant feeling. But sooner or later you lose the balance of mind that allows the impartial observer stance and get all embroiled in the drama again. In dismay you look around for some passing geese to grab hold of, or a pair of spectacles.

This gives a crude image of our life as a vain effort to give ourselves a temporary illusion that things are going our way, that we are in control, and that we will somehow survive this doomed fall to earth. We

grab hold of whatever will help us feel good.

Practising with the khandhas is like learning to enjoy the free fall. To our enormous relief, we discover that the ground is also an illusion. So we're free-falling, without danger of a sudden crash. To make this discovery, we need to get to know the khandhas. What are these features of experience which delude us into thinking they could provide a secure abode within the reality of anicca, dukkha, anattā? Can we feel the stress involved in clinging? Can we learn not to panic when they eventually let us down and we sense the free fall?

With continued attention to experience, these in-between moments of non-clinging become clearer and less terrifying. This is how we learn to enjoy the free fall. As we sensitize ourselves to the contrasting experiences of clinging and non-clinging, the Buddha assures us our nature automatically shifts towards non-clinging. We become happier and more content. Ultimately, we become enlightened, meaning we have been liberated from the futility of clinging.

So let's have a look at the first khandha, material form. This includes the body and all its sense bases—eyes, ears, and so on—as well as the external material world: earth, plants, animals, mountains, houses, cars, computers, mobile phones, food. Anything we can touch or see or hear or smell or taste is part of this first khandha.

We cling very tenaciously to the material form of our own body. Notice all the thoughts and emotions resulting from a headache or other pain. Any illness is a great teacher about how we cling to our bodies. We usually build our future around being able to walk, run, lift, carry—not to mention hear, see, eat, and talk. We get quite a shock if any of these fail. There's no way around the dukkha, but we can experience it moment by moment and let it teach us about the mistake we're making in assuming we can rely on our bodies to support our agenda in life.

And we accumulate so much material form around us in life: house, car, mobile phones, clothes, garden, books, furniture. Often we don't notice our attachment to these until we lose them or they let us down in some way. If the car breaks down, or someone breaks into your house and steals the TV, there will probably be a lot of dukkha to endure.

One mistake that's easy to make when we hear this teaching is to start disdaining the material world, including our own body, as the source of dukkha. This is a mistake. Neither the world nor our body cause dukkha—only our mistaken belief that they can offer us permanent support and be the basis for a happy life. The Buddha asks us to treat these with care and respect. It's only in an intimate, caring relationship with our bodies and the material world that we experience how we stress ourselves out in the effort to grasp these as me or mine. We can't learn that from a distance.

To encourage this positive relationship, think of your daily activities as an aspect of mettā for the material world. When you are eating, doing yoga, washing your hands, do all these in a spirit of self-care. In your

daily chores, can you do them as an act of gratitude for the safety and ease the physical structure of Satipañña offers us? We wouldn't be here in retreat if the walls and roof weren't holding together, or if we had no plates to hold our dinner. If you're doing some gardening, can you see this as adding beauty to the world? When you take a walk around the meadows during the break times, can you see this as an act of appreciation for the material world around you? Trees, sky, ground, wildlife.

Let's look now at the second khandha, vedanā or feeling. We've already come across vedanā as one of the steps in the wheel of dependent origination. Vedanā describes the way we categorize sensations as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. If we don't tune into vedanā, our system moves on to the next link in the wheel, generating desire for pleasant vedanā, aversion to unpleasant, and ignoring the neutral. Once this wheel has moved past vedanā, it gets progressively more difficult to stop before it ends up at dukkha.

By contrast, if we learn to tune into the basic pleasure-displeasure-neutrality of sense contacts—and know from experience the pain of dukkha—we can persuade ourselves to enjoy the pleasant without clinging, to bear with the unpleasant without pushing away, and to pay close attention to the neutral, because the lack of stimulation is very relieving to our frazzled nerves.

In fact, clinging to all the other khandhas boils down to clinging to vedanā, as explained in the teaching on the wheel of dependent origination. So why do we study all the other khandhas? It's because we're so deeply enmeshed with these that we rarely notice the feeling-reaction coupling at the core. But reflecting on the khandhas helps us see through the illusion we are creating.

For example, take material form. Imagine primitive man making his way northwards across Europe. It gets wetter and colder—unpleasant vedana—so he builds himself a hut to shelter in. The hut becomes associated with pleasant vedana. He likes it. He starts to think of it as home. Fast forward to our modern homes that we work forty years to pay for, with all their decor and furniture and gardens. This attachment covers a huge section of our life. We think it's the house, the garden, that we want and need. But actually it's the pleasant vedana these give us—from physical sensations like warmth and comfort, and from concepts like security, safety, and status that generate more pleasant vedana.

If we are lucky enough to have somewhere we can call home, reflecting on our relationship with it will bring up pleasant thoughts of being cosy and secure, and the very unpleasant thoughts of losing our home. To reflect mindfully, we have to keep letting go of whatever desires might arise—for instance, to paint the house. If we hadn't made the effort to be mindful, the thought of our home could have turned the wheel all the way to birth, and we would be out painting the house before we knew where we were. And of course, the rain and wind would eventually destroy our careful painting, so the wheel would turn on to dukkha.

By reflecting on the khanda of material form, we are learning to let the wheel come to rest at the point of vedana while we think of our home and other possessions. This purifies our relationship with the first khanda. We become more appreciative of our possessions. We enjoy them more fully and are not quite so

dismayed and appalled when they go the way of all things into the abyss of loss and decay. We paint the house mindfully, knowing all our efforts will come to naught—apart, that is, from the effort to be mindful. That's the one that will pay dividends.

It's the same with the other khandas. We bind ourselves to these for the sake of the pleasant vedana they offer. Vedana is really the key to unlock the chain binding us to suffering. So during retreat here this week, really try to sensitise yourself to the pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality resulting from physical sensations and the mental world of thoughts, ideas, and memories. The better you can do this on retreat, the easier it will be to reflect on the khandas mindfully afterwards, feeling the associated pleasant and unpleasant feelings as we think about these and the role they play in our life. Reflecting like this teaches us the futility of clinging. The wheel comes to halt more and more often at the point of vedana as we contemplate the khandas.

Let's go on to look at the third khanda: perception. A perception is the mind's attempt to categorize whatever stimulus it receives. For example, a certain pattern of pressures falls on the eardrum and the mind recognizes a ringing tone. One teacher uses the image of a filing cabinet to illustrate this khanda. Whatever comes in has to be sorted into its correct file. The more attached we are to this khanda, the more time we spend with our back turned to the incoming sense data, ignoring most of them in favour of a preoccupation with files and sub-files and finding the exact category for each sensation.

The stimulus can be mental as well as physical. Suppose some loud, high-pitched vibrations impact on the ear and we perceive these as a ringing tone. The perception "ringing tone" in turn stimulates the mind to do some further classification, perhaps comparing this vibration with the memory of our house alarm and alarm clock before ending up with the concept "doorbell." A concept is a mental amalgamation of the memory of many perceptions, cemented by beliefs and culture. Primitive man, for example, would not have had the concept "doorbell," and if he heard one, might have been sorting through his memory of birdsongs trying to recognise this peculiarly shrill one.

Concepts get strung together to form thoughts and mental images. A pattern of light, shade, and colour falls on the eye and the mind recognises our neighbour's face, and we think, "Here's John from down the road." It's truly amazing how the mind can recognise and classify the complex patterns of sight and smell and sound that it is bombarded with each moment. But each perception is just a guess at the reality that stimulated it—like my seeing the red cloth brushing the floor and my mind constructing a life-size image of Bhante Bodhidharma, as I explained in another talk.

So perceptions, with their resulting concepts, mental images, and thoughts, are very, very clever guesswork based on what we remember, what we believe to be likely, and some incoming data from the senses. They impose a structure on the world that we would swear to be true. And this can certainly be helpful—for example, we need to recognise a certain pattern of light as a cup in order to drink tea. Could we accept our perceptions as helpful, clever ways to represent reality, but nothing more than that? A

temporary classification which needs to be continually reconfirmed by checking against our sensory input? Then we wouldn't get so startled when the cup shatters into little pieces, spilling all the tea.

Take, for example, our deeply held belief that there's someone called "me" whose location is probably within or nearby my body—a "me" who is, or should be, in control of my body and my life. The Buddha taught that this perception of self is created as part of the reaction to vedana. In order to get what it wants, or get rid of what it doesn't want, the mind-body complex lets desire generate a perception of a self that can take decisions and get the body into action. It's a wonderfully clever way that our biology has found to satisfy its needs.

Despite our deep belief in the reality of "me," the Buddha teaches that the real truth is anatta—not-self. This is a very difficult teaching to get our heads around. But some people have sudden insights into anatta.

While walking in the Himalayas, D.E. Harding experienced a moment in which all his mental chatter died down. "As if I had been born that instant, innocent of all memories." He looked down to find a pair of trouser legs terminating in a pair of brown shoes, sleeves terminating sideways in a pair of pink hands, and a shirt front terminating in nothing whatsoever. But this nothing, this hole where his head should have been, was no ordinary vacancy. The emptiness was filled with mountains, trees and sky—everything in his visual field. He had lost a head and gained a world. There arose no questions, he said, but only peace and a quiet joy, and the sensation of having dropped an intolerable burden.

The perception of anattā is a very beautiful one, which can arise quite naturally when the mental chatter dies down. But the thought of anattā is often unsettling or even frightening. The Buddha never answered questions of the form "Do I exist?" or "Is there a self?" but asked people to experience for themselves that the perception of self is conditional. It arises when there is a desire for whatever vedanā is felt.

The sense of self, like all perceptions, is the mind's guess at how to interpret present reality. When a pattern of black and yellow light strikes the eye and gives rise to the very unpleasant thought of a tiger about to pounce, it makes a lot of sense to get our biological act together—using the concept of me being in control and putting all my energy into escaping. And if the tiger catches us and we see we're doomed, it makes sense to change our minds and see that this painful, frightened entity is not our true self. In that sublime state, we could even wish the tiger bon appétit!

Can we see the self as a temporary, provisional, best guess at interpreting present reality? Very helpful at times, but not the ultimate truth. Can we see it wax and wane as circumstances dictate? For example, the way a sense of me suddenly blossoms when something nice happens. It's very interesting to note that you didn't remark on its absence before the sudden blossoming. The experience of not-self is very subtle and unobtrusive—that's why we don't notice it. It's quite an unremarkable experience, until we think about it. The experience of self, on the other hand, always calls attention, even if it's an unpleasant experience—for example, the way that sense of me crumples or rears up in anger when something unpleasant happens.

Let's look now at the fourth khandha: saṅkhāra. There are many translations for saṅkhāra—mental formations, mental factors, mental habits, habitual tendencies, even concoctions. In everyday language we refer to some of these as moods and emotions, such as depression, anger, love, joy. Others, such as laziness, we might think of as a state of mind, while others, such as wisdom, we might think of as a mental attribute.

Each moment the saṅkhārā change with the circumstances we find ourselves in, but each of us favours different sets. Some of us have a tendency towards anger, others towards delusion, others towards joy. Our characters and personalities are determined by our saṅkhārā. Some saṅkhārā are unwholesome in the sense that they lead to suffering. Others lead towards nibbāna—these are termed beautiful saṅkhārā. Still others are ethically neutral; they can be present in either wholesome or unwholesome states.

One of the neutral saṅkhārā is volition, which is particularly important because it links with kamma, the ethical force at work in life. Volition, also translated as intention or will, factors into every conscious moment. Even seeing and hearing are intentional. So every moment we are sowing kamma for ourselves.

Kamma is like a seed; it ripens as fruit. Actions or speech motivated by kindness or other beautiful qualities ripen as various forms of happiness. Actions motivated by hatred or other unwholesome qualities ripen as unhappiness. Kamma ripens in many ways, but perhaps the most important is the type of saṅkhārā it develops. If we're motivated by greed to steal someone's wallet, we develop habits of greed, deceitfulness, shamelessness, among others. If we're motivated by kindness to care for a sick child, we develop habits such as patience, compassion, love.

It is the motivation that matters, not the act itself. If we care for the child because we feel trapped in this role and we let resentment show, making cruel remarks now and then, we develop cruelty and resentment rather than beautiful saṅkhārā.

Non-attachment and non-hatred are amongst the beautiful saṅkhārā. These are very unexciting terms, but I had a striking demonstration of the beauty of non-attachment during one retreat. There was a bed of wildflowers in the garden, and I was enthralled by the gorgeous colours. But my mind would get lost in thoughts of sowing a flower bed like this at home, and surely my friends would want one too, and on and on it went until I was tense with anxiety about these future gardens. Although the scene in front of me was beautiful, I felt contorted by tension. I sadly decided I would have to forgo the gorgeous flower bed if I was to get any peace of mind.

Then one day as I was drying dishes, there was a moment where I simply felt the weight of the cup and the softness of the cloth, and my mind expanded into a beautiful freedom. It was a moment without attachment, but one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. I had never realised how much I was clinging until I experienced that one moment of non-attachment.

Comparing this with my experience at the flower bed, I could see that attachment leads to misery, while

non-attachment allows perfect contentment.

Non-hatred also sounds mundane but can be put in more positive language as friendliness, kindness, love, and patience. As you would expect, compassion, equanimity, and sympathetic joy are also among the beautiful states of mind.

We cling to these *khandhas* by identifying ourselves with our emotions and mind states, thinking "I am angry," "I am happy," "I am sleepy." The truth of the matter is that these are temporary states of mind which arise because of certain conditions and cease when these conditions pass away. When we become closely identified with any mind state, we become blind to any alternative way of viewing the situation, and the mind loses its flexibility.

During a long car journey I was feeling a bit sick and very grumpy. A friend smiled and made some pleasantry. For a moment I forgot to be grumpy and my heart lifted—but then I remembered "I am grumpy" and started sinking back into the state. But that momentary lift showed me the state wasn't the absolute truth, and I could make the effort to be sociable. I found myself resisting, feeling it would be disloyal to my grumpy self, who deserved my loyalty. On digesting this, my sociability-related *saṅkhāras* won out over my self-loyalty ones, and I decided to perk up a bit.

As always, mindfulness is the key to seeing through delusion—in this case, the belief that "I am grumpy," rather than a more accurate belief such as "grumpiness is here now, but conditions could change."

It's also easy to cling to *saṅkhāras* like love, joy, compassion, and understanding, not seeing how these come and go depending on circumstances. When we've had a good meal or heard some good news, we can feel kind, happy, and understanding. It's so tempting to believe this is the real me. But then there is shock and grief when this wonderful state breaks down again. Can we notice the beautiful *saṅkhāras* objectively, enjoying them while they last, letting them go when the conditions change? It's a tough practice. We have to let everything go for the sake of complete freedom.

This brings us to the last of the *khandhas*: consciousness. To be conscious is to experience the other four *khandhas*, the sensory world around us and the mental world within. If we are unconscious, this experience vanishes. This is the sense in which the term consciousness is used when it refers to the fifth *khandha*. Consciousness can also be used to refer to the experience of *nibbāna*, but that's not included in the *khandhas*. The *khandhas* only describe what we cling to, and *nibbāna* is what we're left with when we stop clinging to them.

Consciousness is often likened to a screen on which a film is projected. The light from the projector has to fall on the screen if we are to see the scenery and characters. If there was no screen, the light would just pass through, and if there were no dust in the air to scatter it, the light beam would be invisible—it would make no impact on us. In the same way, the various dramas of our lives, as well as their component parts of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, body sensations, and mental activity, all have to project onto the screen of

consciousness to have any impact on us.

Is there a difference between consciousness, awareness, and mindfulness? Sometimes the words are used interchangeably, so it can be confusing. For this talk, I use awareness and mindfulness interchangeably. We all know that we can be conscious though not mindful—we are on autopilot, letting the mind run away on thoughts but not noticing that these thoughts are just part of our present experience. Going back to the movie analogy, it's as if we're in the movie, playing our role, feeling our feelings, totally immersed in the plot.

Mindfulness turns attention to our conscious experience, and the mind starts taking an interest in what's being projected on the screen. It's often described as a different level of consciousness. We can have stretches where we see the film quite objectively, like watching ourselves acting in the movie of our lives. Then we lose mindfulness and get sucked into some aspect of the plot that was on the screen, acting it all out with gusto.

The Buddha taught that there are six separate doorways to consciousness, involving the five senses and also the mind—for example, when a thought or memory falls on the screen of consciousness. Certain conditions have to be fulfilled for each door to open. In order to hear a bird song, for example, we need the bird to sing, good hearing, as well as attention. If any of these is missing, then hearing consciousness does not happen. Although we say, "Isn't the silence beautiful," we can't actually hear silence. Perhaps what we're enjoying is the absence of hearing consciousness.

It's the same for all the other senses. We need the sense object, sensory physiology, and attention. Sight, sound, body sensations, smell, taste, and mental activities—all of these are separate doorways to conscious experience. But they are completely separate, independent experiences.

I first noticed this separation of the different fields of consciousness one time while walking during a retreat. I was noting the feeling of the feet swinging forward and stepping down onto the ground.

So my attention was on body consciousness. But then I suddenly saw the tip of my foot appearing and disappearing as I felt it come to the end of the forward swing. I found myself amazed that these experiences coincided so perfectly.

Before that, I would never have questioned that the sight and feel of the foot would coincide. But now I could sense that logical expectations, sight, and bodily sensations were occupying three separate worlds. It seemed a pure wonder and an incredible gift that they all fitted into each other so neatly. I was tasting the separation of consciousness into its six fields.

See if you can tune into the different fields of consciousness—for example, vision, hearing, and bodily experience. Joseph Goldstein recommends using noting phrases of the form "sounds being known," "walking being known," and so on, to turn attention towards that entity which registers experience. Can you get a sense of how separate are the worlds of hearing, seeing, and physical sensing?

The Buddha also taught that we only experience one doorway for consciousness at a time—sight or sound or smell or mental activity. But this is all happening at such a fast rate that we don't notice the separate registrations.

Once I was walking towards a door to open it, feeling the feet lifting, moving. Then my hand went out to grasp the handle of the door—touching, turning, turning, pushing, pushing. Then my foot lifted to take another step. At the moment I felt the foot lift, I realized my hand had disappeared totally from consciousness. I got such a fright I looked down to see if my hand had dropped off. But it was still there, and I realized it was simply that perception had sharpened so that I was experiencing just one sensation at a time.

These kinds of experiences undermine our usual fascination with the plot that's playing on the screen of consciousness and make us wonder about the nature of consciousness itself. To study this fifth khandha, we need to calm ourselves in meditation sufficiently to extract ourselves from the fascination of the plot and simply watch the film. Then at times we might relax enough to get a sense of what often feels like a more stable sense of self—the one who watches the film, the one who knows experience, the observer, the witness.

At those moments we're noticing our identification with the fifth khandha. We sense "this is happening within me" or "I am observing all this." Bhante uses the analogy of looking through a shop window. You see the goods inside but might also notice your own reflection as you watch. If the stuff for sale doesn't appeal, you might get more interested in your own face. In the same way, when our consciousness film is not too exciting, we can bring attention to the sense of "me," the one who experiences, observes, and knows all this. Although at first it feels like a deep and reliable sense of self, it also begins to shift and slide when the spotlight turns upon it. So we begin to lose faith in this final khandha as a stable source of happiness.

At other times we lose that sense of watching the screen but remain mindful. We feel more intimate with sensations and feelings. They're no longer "out there" on the screen for "me" to watch. This is the loss of identity with the fifth khandha. Sensations and feelings arise and pass just as before, but no one is watching anymore. It's an experience of anattā.

Our whole system functions just fine without the usual sense of "me" being in charge or watching the film. In our earlier analogy, we're now tasting freefall, no longer clinging even to this fifth khandha for security. Each sensation of life is intimately known, but there's no central control system, no observer, no one knowing. We glimpse the state of non-clinging, the end of suffering, nibbāna.

However, until our trust in this state deepens to total enlightenment, the sense of self sooner or later rears its head again as we start clinging to familiar experiences to help us feel secure.

Studying the khandhas helps us to discover what it is we cling to, unwittingly creating dukkha in the

process. Ultimately, all our clinging boils down to wanting to feel good, clinging to pleasant vedanā. In an effort to do this, we scrabble around in the heap of material form, buying goods, nice clothes, makeup, in an effort to feel secure about our bodies and our material well-being. Or else we polish our spectacles, choose a new pair of lenses, as we immerse ourselves in the heap of perceptions. At other times we get lost in the heap of saṅkhāra, repeating old habits in an effort to get things stable. When we're relaxed and mindful, we fall into the heap of consciousness, concocting stability from the illusion that there's someone called "me" who experiences "my" life.

The good news is that deeper awareness of our habit of clinging—and how much it hurts—makes us more willing to let go and freefall with the truths of anicca, dukkha, anattā. We get more curious about the state of non-clinging. Instead of the temporary highs offered by the khandhas, we become enthralled by the possibility of letting these slip through our fingers. We discover the stability offered by knowing the instability of life.

May these reflections on the five khandhas help us experience the joy of non-clinging.

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