Summing up the Khandhas

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 16:01

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed noble and fully self-enlightened one.

So this is the final talk in our sequence about the *khandhas*, these aggregates. I want to try and bring everything together and see the reason why the Buddha taught in this way. Remember that his main technique was to deconstruct what we experience. He's always pulling it apart, either as a slice of the present moment or as a process. In terms of the present moment he uses the *khandhas* and also the six consciousnesses. Every consciousness we have must have a base, so it's one of the five senses and the mind itself which is the sixth base. As a process he uses dependent origination.

If we were to follow the *khandhas*, we have the first split away from the body itself. Remember when we talk about the body in terms of insight, we're talking about how the mind experiences the body. So that's when we come across these four great elements. It's not just moving the body, feeling it moving and things like that. The actual makeup of the body itself is how the body is experienced by the mind, and we come down to these really basic percepts which are these four great elements of fire, earth, water and air, which is temperature, pressure, cohesiveness, elasticity and movement.

So that's one type of experience sectioned off from the next thing, which is the intellect about perception. These perceptions begin at a very basic thing, so what we can say is that at all times there's the actual experience of a sensation coming in at one of the sense doors and a representation of it in the mind. That's your percept, and it's from these percepts which are memories, basically your memory, so you don't have to keep seeing blue and remembering blue. It has this memory perception, and these perceptions grow until they become concepts, at which point they're really beginning to move into the fourth category which is the *saṅkhāra*.

But there's an intermediate stage of these immediate percepts. When the mind begins to perceive them as either pleasant or unpleasant, that's where you've got feeling. These feelings are the quality of the actual original stimulus that's coming into the body, so you're perceiving it as pleasant and unpleasant.

Now when you watch the breath, you see you can just feel it as a gentle sensation, but you can also perceive it as something which has a certain pleasantness to it. At that point it's shifting from just being a neutral feeling, a neutral sensation you might say, to something which is taking on a certain value in

terms of pleasantness. At this point you're moving into the area of feeling.

So that's another perception going on. There's the perception of the actual sensation that's coming in and an added perception of how the heart's experiencing it, the heart part of us, the emotional part. The other bit that comes into the body, which the body also feels as a perception, is the mind in the body. The mind in the body has this emotional content, and that's where you get your mental feelings from.

So there are those two types of feelings: physical feelings such as when you stub your foot, and emotional feelings such as when you're feeling happy and excited. These are all, in terms of the Buddha, to be classed as feelings whether they originate from the body or the mind. They're just feelings. The important thing is that they're perceived as either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. So there's no way we cannot live in a non-dualistic world at that level. All our experience is divided into some degree of pleasantness and some degree of unpleasantness.

The next bit is the *saṅkhāras*, and this is where we have included all our reactions to things, all our conceptualizations, all our emotional life, the higher emotional life. The way it's put is *saññā-saṅkhā-papañca*. So the *saññā* is all the perceptual memories you've got at the intellectual level. The *saṅkhā* refers to all the emotional stuff, and the *papañca* is proliferation. So that's how we proliferate through these basic sensations and perceptions. As you know, it gets extremely complicated – concepts like freedom and democracy and things like that. It begins to move into really very complicated areas. But from the Buddha's point of view, you can always draw it down into one of these categories.

The fifth category is cognition. Now cognition, the way I personally experience it, is that the first level of knowing – it's as though, my own way of explaining it is, it's as though all the information is hitting the screen of the television. And that screen is a position of knowing. It's a point where there's an immediate cognition of what there is. Now the reason that this is made a distinction of is because it's to be separated out from the knowing.

Now the whole process of insight meditation is to make these *khandhas* objects. Normally we're in the *khandha*. The *khandha* is our personhood, our personality, our character – it's all included within that, the *khandhas*. In our meditation, we're pushing them away from us to look at them. In that process of making them objects within ourselves, through our meditation, we're actually beginning to discover this other quality which is the knowing. This knowing has certain qualities about it which is the quality of awareness, which is a type of knowing, and this intelligence.

It's slowly, as it were, shifting our location out of the *khandhas* into this knowing, which is the process of awakening. So long as we're in the *khandhas*, so long as we are identifying with an emotion, identifying with a concept, with an idea, identifying with a person – by which I mean these *khandhas*, identifying with a personality – so long as there's that identity, we're in a different location. When we're meditating and we pull back from that and they become objects to observe, we've found a different location. We've moved house.

Remember the image that the Buddha uses about the house builder: constantly building this house, but I found your ridge pole, I've broken you up and smashed you and all that. It's very violent. He's discovered the unconditional *citta*, the unconditional consciousness. That's all we're doing. We're just slowly beginning to reposition ourselves in this other place.

So that's the reason why the Buddha teaches the *khandhas*, because in your meditation you can actually, as you experience things, you can reflect on that. You don't have to go into a blank when you meditate. You can look and then every so often you can reflect upon what you're experiencing and say, well that's the *khandha*, you see, and this is the way that this knowing knows what it knows.

It's one of these paradoxes that the knowing has to pull itself out of the intellect in order to gain its own independence and its own self-knowledge of itself. It doesn't know itself. It simply thinks that it is thought, it thinks that it is emotion, it thinks that it is the body. By making these things objects, it's discovering a different identity. It's that process which we have to keep reinforcing all the time, which is the process of awakening – awakening to a different level of consciousness.

When it comes to the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, the four places where the Buddha says we have to establish this consciousness, this way of looking, there's four of them. The first one is the body, the second one is feeling, so that's your *vedanā*. The third one is your *citta*, that's the word used here, which is your *saṅkhāra*. And the fourth one is looking at the dhamma, looking at what you experience from the point of view of the dhamma. So that's where you get these five different hindrances, the seven factors of enlightenment, and included in that are these five *khandhas*. Perception is presumed all the way through, and the act of cognition is presumed all the way through. You wouldn't know anything without that primary reflection.

These things can be experienced. It's not as though they are abstract ideas. Meditators can actually experience these different things just pulling themselves apart. You can experience an emotion, for instance, against the body and it separates out from the body itself, so you can see this is an emotion, a mental state which is finer, and the body is resonating. The body is actually mirroring it, but normally we experience it as one thing.

You can actually – there are experiences where you can see the original perception, the original feeling, the perception of the feeling and the cognition as a process, as an immediate constant process. So all these things that the Buddha's talking about are not intellectualizations. They're not something that he's arrived at by just thinking about something because it makes sense to us from a thought point of view. If you haven't experienced these, it's absolutely separate, but they can actually be directly experienced.

So it's the same with dependent origination. It's not something that he's intellectualized or conceptualized out of human experience as such. It's something that you can actually see in your meditation.

So remember that the Buddha has two purposes in his teaching, one of which he really stresses. It's the negative side, the bit about suffering, unsatisfactoriness, and how we achieve our misery. And the other

part is the end of suffering, just the end of suffering. This end of suffering is called *Nibbāna*, it's called the unconditioned, the unborn. He's got various ways of pointing to it, and he talks about it also, remember, as the unbounded, unshackled consciousness.

Unshackled consciousness. What's it unshackled from? It's unshackled from various things, but it's mainly unshackled from its identity with these five *khandhas*. So that's your purpose in your meditation and the purpose of knowing these various ways, because it's as though in the Buddha's deconstruction of human experience, by looking at it that way, you're closer to seeing what he's actually asking you to see.

Whereas if you were to use, shall we say, a Freudian model, so you'd be looking for your superego, your ego and your id, which is fine – you find things, it makes sense – but would it lead you to liberation? This is the point. So what I would say is if you want to be sure that you're on the path to liberation, the path to awakening, then you've got to start seeing the world the way the Buddha sees it, which doesn't particularly negate other ways of seeing it. They may be complementary, who knows. But we definitely have to begin to see the way the Buddha saw things, and then we begin through our meditation to experience that.

I think that brings my little homily for the evening to an end. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering by observing the *khandhas* sooner rather than later.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.