

2: Five Heaps and Three Poisons

Presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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I have spoken about the open space of the sky in order to represent the open context of our Experiencing, and clouds within the sky to refer to contents arising within this context.

In order to talk about the various kinds of content that students became clouded by, we should address what these 'clouds' or entanglements are, and how they happen. And to do that we need to begin with the traditional Teaching of the three kleshas of passion, aggression, and stupidity because they are the currents that stir together as all of our 'entanglements'. They make up the basic style through which self-image relates to experience.

So, what are the clouds? Self-image, the image one has of oneself and the rest of the world comes about through a process of contraction. To understand the three kleshas it is helpful to understand the play of the "five skandhas". Now, don't be scared by Sanskrit terms. We chanted the Heart Sutra, the Maha Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra just a few moments ago.

In translations from the early Pali texts the five skandhas are often referred to as the "five aggregates of clinging". They can also be called the "five heaps". The five skandhas have been translated by Anzan Hoshin roshi as "form, basic reactivity, symbolization, habitual patterning and consciousness". When the Buddha originally presented his Teachings on this, he piled up five heaps of different grains to represent these categories of impermanent phenomena.

The five skandhas can be discussed in many different ways, but they are primarily used in the Abhidhamma and the Abhidharmakosa to describe body (rupa) and mind or nama (with the categories of vedana, samjna, samskara, vijnana) as a collection of various kinds of things instead of being one solid thing, like the heaps of grains that the Buddha showed his disciples.

Instead of just describing body and mind as various kinds of things, the five skandhas can also be used to describe how perceptions and cognitions occur as a consequence of self-image. To illustrate this, I'll quote from a passage in the "Development of Buddhist Psychology" series of classes presented by Anzan roshi in 1990:

"An example I use quite often - which of course is not at the level of mind moments, more at the level of mind-hours, mind-weeks or mind-years, but is something that we can use to understand how subtler processes happen - is to draw an example from something that almost everybody has experienced.

You walk into a room and there isn't anybody there and you know there is nobody in the house, but there is somebody there and (sharp inhalation) you feel shocked for a moment.

And then you look and you realize it is a mirror and it is just you.

So you walk into the room and all of a sudden there is "HUHHH" - there is just "Something is there!" and everything becomes frozen. Everything becomes form. There is a big split that comes in so that you are there and what you are experiencing is out there, very definitely out there, but so much so that you cannot

get any kind of focus on it.

At first it is just “HUHHH”, just panic and then feeling. You go “What is it? What’s wrong? There is somebody here. There is somebody here.”

And then perception, the third skandha comes in and you go, “There is a person in here and they are about this tall and they are”...so on and so forth.

And the next skandha, the fourth skandha comes in, in which you kind of rummage through and see if what you are experiencing now has a precursor, that is to say, if it is similar to something you have experienced in the past.

And you go, “Well, that’s me.”

Then the fifth skandha, or consciousness skandha, “Oh! It’s a mirror.” And sort of cluing into what is actually going on.

So the five skandhas can be looked at as simply a way of clarifying what we are experiencing. However, the way in which that happens tends to have an awful lot of contraction to it.

First of all, this sense of “this”, “that”, “self” and “other”, something out there – has a quality of panic to it. Not just in that example, but in the way in which self-image functions as nama rupa in the arising of mind moments, there is a very frozen, crystallized quality to it.”

According to the Abhidhamma and the Abhidharmakosa, attachment to feelings is developed through the second skandha of basic reactivity. And that brings us to the topic of the three Kleshas.

In the Pali Canon’s discourses kilesa is often associated with the various passions that “defile” bodily and mental states. In the Pali Canon’s Abhidhamma and post-canonical Pali literature, ten “defilements” are identified, the first three of which – passion, aggression, and stupidity – are considered to be the “roots” of suffering. The Sanskrit word klesa refers to mental states that temporarily cloud the mind’s nature. They are referred to as “the three poisons” in Mahayana Buddhism. The kleshas specifically refer to the subtle movement of mind (citta) when it initially encounters a mental object. This is the second skandha of basic reactivity.

So at this point, the three klesas are as yet very subtle. They are orientations rather than actual emotions or feeling-tones and storylines. They are like predispositions rather than the stirring of states. But if this becomes amplified through the following skandhas of symbolization, and then habitual patterning, it becomes a state within consciousness.

It is through following the direction of these predispositions that we become lost in the poisonous clouds of the klesas. Unless our practice is deep and subtle, we will only very rarely recognize the basic reactivity of the second skandha. But through opening up around how the three klesas of passion, aggression, and stupidity have clouded our experience in the fifth skandha again and again and again, we become more and more capable of releasing these states earlier and earlier.

When we chanted the Heart Sutra this morning, it kept telling us that the five skandhas are empty, or sky-

like. They are not solid, not fixed. They are like air and moisture and various causes and conditions mixing as clouds while all around the clouds is the already open sky.

When our world seems covered in clouds of passion, aggression, and stupidity, and we are coughing and hacking at the consequences of identifying with them, the truth is that our world is actually already open like the sky. We do not have to follow through on our pre-dispositions, our compulsions, our clouded states.

The open sky is available to us in the spaciousness of our actual bodily sensations, our ability to sit up straight and to walk upright through the spaces around the bodymind. As our practice deepens and opens then we can realize the five skandhas as the five wisdoms and the three poisons as the numberless gates to the Dharma that we can move through freely.

I will talk about the shapes of these clouds of passion, aggression, and stupidity soon. But, right now, let us sit up straight and walk upright.