



The Concept of Man in Theravada Buddhism

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Abstract

Theravāda Buddhism looks at all things in terms of integrated factors. There is no real self (or essence) in all things. When all of the elements composing one's being are divided and separated, no self remains. A simple example that is often employed is that of the 'car' : when all parts are assembled according to certain specifications, the result is called "car," but if all of those parts are completely separated, the form of the car cannot be found ; there are only parts that can be referred to according to their various names.¹ That is to say, the essence of the car does not exist separately from the composition of its part ; there is only the word "car" for the condition describing the assemblage of those parts. And no self can be found even in parts that consist of the combination of other smaller parts. Therefore, when we say that something exists in terms of a combination of various elements. When the condition of all things is seen as integrated form composed of various elements, Buddhism can further inform us regarding the composition of those various elements, and their features. Since Buddhism has a special relationship to life, especially in terms of mind, a presentation of the various compositions must include both the physical and the mental aspects, or *rūpa-dhamma* and *nāma-dhamma*, and especially an analysis of the mind.²

Keywords: Man, Five Aggregates, Truth

¹ S. I. 135.

² These can be broadly defined as mind (*nāma*) and matter (*rūpa*) or *nāma-dhamma* and *rūpa-dhamma* ; but the *Abhidhamma* tends to divide these into three : mind (*citta*), mental factors (*cetasika*), and matter (*rūpa*).



1. Introduction

In Buddhism, all states, namely, animals, human, things, are only the streams of tangible states which are composed of a number of sub-elements within other sub-elements; all are dependently conditioned by causes, and relating to each other by their circles of existing and distinction. All those streams of states alter their formations all the time. We can easily say that what is called a human being is the composition of all streams of mental-objects which is known by the term “the five aggregates”.

In the way of human development, Buddhism accepts the ability of human beings, and judges human beings as the creatures which are more capable of developing and purifying their own minds than gods, or even of training themselves towards the state of the Buddha. Moreover, Buddhism praises the person with self-training as an excellence.

All the teachings of the Buddha are based on the theory of the relation between the existence and enlightenment of Man through which relation the main doctrines such as Dependent Origination (*Patīccasamuppāda*), the Three Characteristics of Existence (*Tilakkhana*), the Law of Karma and *Nirvāna* are understood. This article, hence, attempts to investigate and survey the philosophical and psychological views of existence and enlightenment of Man as presented and expounded in all classes of the Buddhist Pāli Canon and its Commentaries. And also the non-Buddhistic Pāli scriptures as well as modern works are studied in order to understand the original idea and its development in terms of reinterpretation and justification. This presentation could be done in many different ways depending on a specific goal, but a presentation will be done based on the Five Aggregates, which is the popular method found in the Buddhist *Suttas*.³

According to Buddhism, dividing the Five Aggregates⁴ entails an analysis of the constituent of life, which we call “being” (*satta*) or “person,” and so on :

1. Corporeality (*rūpa*) is comprised of the elements of the whole *rūpa-dhamma*, body and behavior of the body, or matter and material energy, including the qualities and behavior of this matter and energy.

2. Feeling and Sensation (*vedanā*) amounts to the impressions of pleasure (*sukha*), pain (*dukkha*), or difference that occur by contact with the world through the five senses and the heart/mind.

3. Perception (*saññā*) is that which can be established or known. In other words, it is the establishment of knowledge of conditions and the cause for remembering that object.

4. Mental formations, predispositions, or volitional activities (*saṅkhāra*) are the psychological compositions, or the various qualities that embellish the mind making it good, bad, or neutral, and they have intention (*cetanā*) as their guide. To put it very simply, some of these good and bad thoughts are as follows : confidence (*saddhā*), mindfulness (*sati*), moral shame (*hiri*), moral fear (*ottappa*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), joy (*muditā*), equanimity (*upekkhā*), wisdom (*paññā*), delusion (*moha*), ill-will (*dosa*), greed (*lobha*), conceit (*māna*), perspective (*ditthi*), envy (*issa*), and avarice (*macchariya*).⁵

5. Consciousness (*Viññāna*) involves being aware of sensation via the six senses (that is, the five senses and mind), such as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physically touching, and mentally understanding.

³ S. III, 158.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47 ; *Vbh.* 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.



2. Buddhist Concept of Man in the Four Noble Truth

The Buddha's words reveal the meaning of the Four Noble Truths, which serve as a summary of the essence of Buddhism, and there are statements of special interest related to the Five Aggregates of Existence that appear in the Four Noble Truths : The first Noble Truth mentions *dukkha* or suffering. Very early on, the Buddha illustrated the meaning or definition of *dukkha* by giving examples of various events and occurrences that were readily apparent and common in people's lives. He did this in order to show various types of *dukkha*. And in the end, the Buddha summed this up by saying that when the Five Aggregates are objects of attachment they become *dukkha*.

Bhikkhus, the following comprise the Noble Truths of *dukkha* : Birth is *dukkha*; the aging process is *dukkha*; death is *dukkha*; associating with things that one does not love is *dukkha*; separation from people or things that one love is *dukkha*; desiring something without attaining it is *dukkha*. In short, attachment to the Five Aggregates is *dukkha*.⁶

Buddha's words, aside from showing the status of the Five Aggregates of Existence in Buddhism, also reveal one important point, and that is the meaning of *dukkha*. In order to make this concept easy to remember and summarize, *dukkha* simply describes the Five Aggregates of Existence when they have become objects of attachment. The main thing that must be studied and noticed here is the difference between the Aggregates of Existence and the Aggregates of Existence as objects of attachment. Please note the following words of the Buddha :

Bhikkhus, I will explain the Five Aggregates of Existences and the Five Aggregates of Existence as objects of attachment. What are the Five Aggregates of Existence ? Body (*rūpa*)... sensation (*vedanā*)... perception (*saññā*)... mental formations (*saṅkhāra*)... and consciousness (*viññāna*) ; any of these that resides in the past, future, or present, is internal or external, far or near, and exists in a crude or refined, inferior or superior manner, are all called the Five Aggregates of Existence.

And what do the Five Aggregates of Existence have to do with attachment ? Body, sensation, perception, mental formations, consciousness, any of these that resides in the past, future or present, is internal or external, far or near, exists in a crude or refined, inferior or superior manner, any of these things that are composed of mental intoxications (*āsava*) are grounds for attachment (*upādāna*).... All of these, therefore, are called the Five Aggregates of Existence as objects of attachment.⁷

Bhikkhus, I will explain the things that cause attachments and comprise attachments; so, all of you listen carefully. Body... sensation... perception... mental formations... consciousness are the things that can cause attachment. The desire to attach or cling (*chandarāga*) to body, sensation, mental formations, and consciousness constitutes attachment to that thing.⁸

The proceeding statement represents one of the most fundamental and important principles for understanding the Buddha's teaching.

3. The Buddhist Concept of Man in the Theory of Karma and Anattā

⁶ *Vin.* I. 10.

⁷ *S.* III. 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.



Buddhism is a way of life, and in the ultimate sense of the term, it cannot be called religion which is concerned with the belief in God. Normally, Buddhists speak of Buddhism as *Buddhasāsana* or *Buddha-Dhamma* meaning the Buddha's teachings. However, by common usage of language, the Buddhists may be allowed to call Buddhism as a religion, because they do believe in the moral law of *karma*.⁹ On the other hand, though the Buddha preached the doctrine of *karma*, he could be called a *kiriya-vādin*, however his teachings are far more than a mere notion of the *karma*-doctrine. He was criticized as a revolutionist because of his replacing *Ātmavāda* and self-mortification with *Anattāvāda* and the Middle Way respectively. Likewise, by the rejection of the caste-system and also of the idea of God he was reckoned as a reformist. By discovering the Four Noble Truths, he is known as a reconstructionist.

The philosophy of Buddhism is chiefly psychological, and its ethics cannot be entirely separated from its metaphysics. The ultimate purpose of all its philosophy is not intellectual but moral – the attainment of freedom from the suffering or *Nibbāna* (Skt. *Nirvāna*) which is the Buddhist *Summum Bonum*. We are told in the *Pitaka* that the Buddha took no interest in purely metaphysical questions, because they appeared to be questions without profit, and a mere waste of time. Even in his most abstruse teachings his purpose is ethical.

The Buddha avoided discussion about purely metaphysical questions, such as whether the world is eternal or not, and so on, which are regarded as vain, for it does not take man nearer to his goal. The world of the Buddha was that of the six-feet-long-living body along with perceptions and thoughts, where the root-cause of suffering and *samsāra*, namely, *avijjā*, can be uprooted. Therefore we can say that Buddhism does not agree with the speculative metaphysics. In Buddhist philosophy, the metaphysical doctrine must relate to the ethical goal of life as the Middle Way (*majjhimā-patipadā*).

The Buddhist idea of existence or the metaphysical doctrine, it is said, can be viewed under the highest forms of explanation, viz., the five *khandhas*, the eighteen *dhātus* and the six *āyatanas*, in the light of the Four Noble Truths. In this way, the Buddha divided truth into two kinds, apparent (*sammuttisacca*) and ultimate (*paramatthasacca*). The latter is actually emphasized by the Buddha. The world of human beings, and its existence, for instance, do not really exist as we apparently perceive them. They are naturally described as “the conditioned existence” (*saṅkhata*), which can be explained in terms of five *khandhas*, namely, matter (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). These five constituents are also called *nāma-rūpa*. According to *Abhidhamma*, *rūpa* signifies fundamental unit of matter, material changes, and the twenty-eight derivative materials which originate from four conditions, viz., “*karma*”, “*citta*”, “nutriment” and “temperature”. *Nāma* refers to consciousness (*citta*) and its mental concomitants (*cetasikas*).

In the realization of existence, we will begin with the analysis of the five *khandhas* as the reality, which represents “life as it is”, but it is not complete in itself, for as usual we are dealing with “life as directly concerning world”. Therefore, the analysis of *āyatanas* has been made with a view to show the world-related life, especially by means of perceiving the world through six sense doors. Here the phenomenal existence can be explained in terms of the six sense-organs and their six sense-objects, the function of which is to develop perceptual awareness. Not only this, it also evolves as a whole in the phenomenal world (*samsāra*). We must remember that the five *khandhas* and the twelve *āyatanas* never function in isolation in the way we have described. But we have

⁹ Luang Suriyabong, *Buddhism : An Introduction* (Colombo : The Lanka Bodha Mandalaya, n.d.), p.5.



discuss them in isolating one from the other in order to comprehend their relative positions that constitute personality.

The *Abhidhammikas* classify the ultimate truth into *citta*, *cetasika*, *rūpa* and *Nibbāna* and admit that the first three do ‘conditionally exist’ (*saṅkhata*), but the last one ‘unconditionally exist’ (*asaṅkhata*). Therefore, the Theravāda Buddhist philosophy is known as realism as it upholds the existence of the ultimate truths. In this connection, the Sarvāstivāda, the Vaibhāsikas, the Sautrāntikas and the Puggalavāda on beings have been elaborately and separately brought out in comparison with the other schools of thought. It should be mentioned here that no Buddhist school admits the definite assertible self, as it would go against the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. The Puggalavādins’ conception of self is, therefore, neither definite nor indefinite self.

The idea of existence classified in terms of *khandhas*, *dhātus* and *āyatanas* as mentioned above, can be well understood only through the causal law of existence, especially the law of *Tilakkhana* and that of *Paticcasamuppāda*, which completely explain the exact way in which the personality is evolved and disintegrated. The law of *Tilakkhana* helps to explain the nature of conditioned things in the light of impermanence, suffering and not-self. The basis of debate between the Buddhists and Hindus is the concept of self.¹⁰ If the causal law of nature is understood in its proper perspective, there will hardly be any scope for further confusion in this matter. According to the causal law of nature, the effect arises from an aggregate of causes and conditions. Because of ignorance arise consciousness, karma-formation, and so on.

4. The Concept of Human Existence in Theravada Buddhism

Buddhism regards the human being as superior to all the other species. The human being is entirely different from other animals in respect of mentality which is somewhat complicated. It is like dense forest that has no entrance and is difficult to penetrate, in comparison with the nature of an animal, which is much easier to understand.¹¹ The Buddha realized that man, while being tempted to perform evil actions, could be properly directed towards the performance of good actions (*kusalakamma*). According to Buddhism, there are three ‘immoral roots’ (*akusalamūla*), namely, lust (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), which are regarded as the original cause of ignorance (*avijjā*).¹² It is, therefore, said that the real nature of an ordinary man is always entangled with the impurities (*kilesas*) and worldly pleasures and he is always guided by ignorance. In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha said : “Oh ! wise man, it is true that not easy to control are evil things, do not let greed and weakness drag you to prolonged suffering.”¹³

When asked, “What is the true idea of human existence in Buddhism ?” the most apt reply is that human existence is ‘a psycho-physical complex’ (*nāma-rūpa*) conditioned and determined by what is called an antecedent state in the process of ‘becoming’ (*bhava*) in which both action (*karma*) and reaction (*karmaphala*) play an essential part in the development of personality. On the other hand, man as perceived from within and without, is analysed into a collection of ‘five aggregates’ (*pañcakkhandha*) of changing elements, namely, the group of his looks (*rūpa*), sentiments (*vedanā*), perceptual outfit (*saññā*), mental pre-dispositions (*saṅkhāra*), and acts of

¹⁰ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, 2nd ed., 1929 ; rpt. (Bombay : Blackie & Son Publishers, 1985), pp.386-389 ; Mrs. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *The Birth of Indian Psychology and Its Development in Buddhism* (London : Luzac & Co., 1936), pp.203, 218 and 222.

¹¹ Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, *The Teaching of Buddha* (Tokyo : Kosaido Printing Co., Ltd., 1982), p.174.

¹² *DN*. III. 275.

¹³ *Dh*. V. 248 : “*Evambho purisa jānāhi pāpadhamma asuññatā mā tam lobho adhammo ca ciram dukkhāya randhayum.*”



consciousness (*viññāna*) such as remembering, thinking and so on.¹⁴ The first group is called ‘matter’ (*rūpa*), as named earlier, but the last four are together termed ‘mind’ (*nāma*), and they are collectively called *nāma-rūpa*.¹⁵ The analysis of human existence into *nāma-rūpa* and five *khandhas* is found both in the *Nikāyas* and the *Abhidhamma*.¹⁶ In the *Khuddaka-Nikāya*, the word *nāmakāya* is used synonymously with *nāma-rūpa*,¹⁷ which is the abbreviated form of the five *khandhas*. It is to be noted that the *Abhidhamma* admits the ‘Four Ultimate Realities’ (*paramattha-dhamma*), namely, *citta* (consciousness), *cetasika* (mental factors), *rūpa* (matter), and *Nibbāna*. It is said, the five *khandhas* can be matched with the Four Ultimate Realities as follows : *Rūpa* is called *rūpa*, *viññāna* is called *citta*, and the rest are included in *cetasikas*. But *Nirvāna* cannot be grouped as it is ‘free from the five *khandhas*’, hence it is called *khandha-vinimutta*.¹⁸

There is another classification of the element of human existence, which is divided into two groups of cognitive faculties and of the different categories of the objects. The two groups are called ‘based’ (*āyatanas*), which are of twelve kinds in number, divided into six cognitive faculties known as ‘six internal bases’ (*ajjhātikāyatanas*) and six categories of corresponding objects known as ‘six external bases’ (*bahirāyatanas*). The internal bases are also regarded as receptive faculties called *indriya* and the external ones are objects called *visaya*. These twelve bases, both internal and external, are sufficient for the formulation of the idea of man. They work for the purpose of developing a consciousness and evolve the being as a whole in the phenomenal world or *samsāra*. In order to grasp the concept of man more easily, the classification of man in accordance with eighteen elements (*dhātus*) comes into existence.¹⁹ Besides the twelve bases and the eighteen elements, Buddhism also admits the classification of man into twenty-two *indriyas*²⁰ into six elements.²¹

It is essential to note that the idea of human existence consisting of the five *khandhas* and twelve *āyatanas* is common to all schools of Buddhism. These *khandhas* and *āyatanas* are generally possessed by all, not only human beings but also animals and gods alike, because, according to Buddhism, man can be born as a god or an animal and vice versa, along with his *karma* accumulated in the human world. The example of this fact can be considered from the *Jātakas*, which narrate about the birth stories of the *Bodhisatta*. This indicates that Buddhism regards man as evolving out of man due to the previous *karma*, since Buddhism considers all perceived things as conditional things (*saṅkhāra*) and thus the objective world is considered the same as the experienced world. In the process of analysis, the principles which explain the nature of the world and the character of man’s existence are reduced to the twelve *āyatanas* and five *khandhas* respectively. Following this, the problems of the world and soul can actually be taken into account as that of matter and mind, and ultimately the world and man are considered as one and the same. That is, the Buddha had a method of instruction based on a division of the world, conventionally called twelve *āyatanas*, into a material aspect (*rūpa*) and non-material aspect

¹⁴ K. K. Mittal, “Concept of Man : The Buddhist View”, IPA. Vol. 15 (1982-83), p. 89.

¹⁵ Mrs. Rhys Davids, *The Birth of Indian Psychology and Its Development in Buddhism*. (London : Luzac & Co., 1936), pp. 12-13.

¹⁶ *Vbh.* 1 ; *Dhs A.* 52 ; *DN.* I. 223 ; II. 32,34 ; *SN.* I. 12.

¹⁷ *Sn.* 1074.

¹⁸ *Comp.* 81 ; Phrarajavaramuni, *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, p. 130.

¹⁹ *Vbh.* 87 ; *Vism.* 484 ; *Comp.* 183 ; *Visuddhi.* 3.65 ; *Saṅgaha.* 44.

²⁰ *Vbh.* 122 ; *Vism.* 491 ; *Comp.* 175 ; *Visuddhi.* 3.72 ; *Saṅgaha.* 41.

²¹ *MN.* III. 31 ; 260 ; 240.



(*nāma*), and counting both aspects together makes a total of five components (*pañcakkhandhas*), which constitute the external world in general and the internal world or man in particular.

5. The Goal of Human Existence

According to the Buddha, good and evil are to be considered as two aspects of human nature, and man usually performs either wholesome and unwholesome karmas, because of the conflict of the two aspects as already mentioned. Hence in the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya*,²² the Buddha classifies human beings into four kinds : (i) Some come from darkness, but will only go to darkness, (ii) Some come from darkness, but will go to light, (iii) Some come from light, but will go to darkness, (iv) Some come from light and they will go to light. The last one is appreciated by the Buddha as it signifies one of not only noble birth, but also of good conduct. Such a person will never suffer in this life and in the life to come. In support of doing good, avoiding evil and purifying one's mind,²³ the Buddha preached the Middle Path as the criterion of the best man. "The tamed is the best among men - *danto settho manussesu*."²⁴ The best man in Buddhism is identified by these five characteristics, namely, being not credulous, knowing the uncreated, having severed all ties, having put an end to opportunity and having removed all desires. The first is that the best man ascertains everything before believing. Secondly, he knows *Nirvāna*. Thirdly, he destroys *samsāra*. Fourthly, he has no chance to do both good and evil. Finally, he has no defilements to hope for anything.²⁵ If one conquers just oneself, one is, indeed, the greatest victor.²⁶ The Buddha with his clear insight understands the human nature and the conduct leading to be a perfect man. In short, man is defined by his actions – what he did, what he is doing, and what he will do ; so his nature is conditioned by *karma*.

6. The Human Existence in the Light of the Four Noble Truths

Strictly speaking, the correct Buddhist position with regard to the existence of man is based on the understanding of the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, the main contents of which are about the idea of man. Actually, there are two domains of *Dharma* enlightened by the Buddha, of which one is the law of *Paticcasamuppāda*, which includes the doctrines of *karma* and *Nirvāna*, and the other one is the Four Noble Truths. These two doctrines are essentially one and the same, because the law of *Paticcasamuppāda* and *Nirvāna* are really the essence of Four Noble Truths. But they are regarded as pure teachings or natural elements, while the Four Noble Truths refer to all enlightened *Dharmas*, which appear in the light of the ordered process with regard to the capacity of man's understanding and making use of.²⁷ Just as the foot of every creature that walks the earth will go into the elephant's footprint, ... so are all right states of mind said to be included in the Four Noble Truths.²⁸ The doctrine of the Four Noble Truths is, therefore, the essence as well as the

²² *AN*. I. 93.

²³ *DN*. II. 49 ; *Dh*. V. 183 ; *Dialogues of the Buddha*, II. 38.

²⁴ *Dh*. V. 321 ; *The Dhammapada*, Trans. by Nārada, p. 251.

²⁵ *Dh*. V. 97.

²⁶ *Dh*. V. 103.

²⁷ Phrarajavaramuni, *Buddha-Dhamma*, pp. 897-901.

²⁸ *MN*. I. 133.



destiny of man. The Buddha addressed his disciples at the Simsapa grove regarding the Four Noble Truths that he had taught them by comparing them to the leaves in his hand, while the remaining *Dharmas* that he had known but did not teach them, are like the leaves in the whole forest, because those *Dharmas* are not conducive to the termination of suffering.²⁹

In the first sermon, the significance of the Four Noble Truths was made known by the Buddha.³⁰ The Noble Truths are so-called because they dealt with reality and are realized by only the Noble Ones such as the Buddha. These truths will lead us only to the highest wisdom.³¹ They constitute a progressive series, that is, each truth leads up to the next. The failure to understand these truths will result in long wandering in *samsāra* for all creatures.³² The Buddha himself exhorted his disciples to put forth their special desire, effort and attention for the understanding of these truths.³³ It is mentioned in the *Samyutta-Nikāya* that one can develop one's spirituality by telling and hearing the Four Noble Truths among good friends (*kalyānamitta*).³⁴

The explanation of man according to the Four Noble Truths should be brought into consideration here. Among the Four Noble Truths, the first truth called suffering is the nucleus around which the remaining truths assemble. The first truth implies all the problems of life comprising birth, old age, disease, despair and so on. In short, anything that exists, including the five *khandhas* and twelve *āyatanas*, is suffering. Buddhism regards the five *khandhas* themselves as suffering. They are like a burden : it means that life is a burden. To be is to suffer and the way out would consist in going out of existence. Suffering is thus the essence as well as the destiny of man. The most important factor of the miserable condition is inherent impermanence (*aniccā*) of man and things. When the existence is impermanent, then there is nothing called permanent soul or self, there is only becoming (*bhava*). It is said that this replacement of the *Upanisadic* idea of Being by that of Becoming and the view of the universe as uninterrupted and unified stream of momentary particulars is the distinct contribution of Buddhism to Indian thought.³⁵ The second truth affirms that there is a cause of suffering called ignorance (*avijjā*) that makes man cling to the sense of his ego and through it to the world by not knowing things as they really are. This truth includes the law of cause and effect (*paticcasamuppāda*) and the immutable law of *karma* and rebirth. And by stopping the operation of the cause of suffering, it is possible, as affirmed by the third truth, to uproot suffering. This truth indicates the law of *Patīccasamuppāda* in the aspect of the Dependent Cessation, otherwise called *Nirvana*. The fourth truth delineates the method one has to adopt in order to achieve complete freedom from suffering. When ignorance is uprooted, one becomes a perfect man or *Arahant*. This truth suggests the way of life called the Middle Way (*Majjhīmapatipadā*), comprising the eight constituent of the Noble Path. And they are further organized into the 'Threefold Training' (*tisikkhā*) as a short practical way.

²⁹ *SN*. V. 437.

³⁰ *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, *SN*. V. 420.

³¹ *SN*. V. 417-418 ; *The Kindred Sayings*, V. 352-355.

³² *The Kindred Sayings*, V. 356.

³³ *Ibid.*, 372.

³⁴ *SN*. V. 436.

³⁵ Pandeya, *Indian Studies in Philosophy*, op. cit., p.198.



7. The Analysis of the Five *Khandhas* as Life Really is.

First of all, in this connection the term “*khandhas*” (Skt. *Skhandhas*) means “groups” (of existence) or ‘groups of clinging’ (*upadānakkhandha*); its alternative renderings are “aggregates”, “categories of objects of clinging,” that constitute man’s personality.³⁶ According to T.W. Rhys Davids, the word “*khandhas*” means : “The elements or substrata of sensory existence, sensorial aggregates which condition the appearance of life in any form. Their character according to quality and value of life and body is evanescent, fraught with ills and leading to rebirth.”³⁷

Buddhism regards man’s life in its reality as composed of the groups of the constituents, say, “five aggregates” (*pañcakkhandhas*) : “When certain things of their various parts combined, we speak of ‘chariot’ or ‘car’, just so when these five *khandhas* are there, we use the designation ‘man’ or ‘being’.³⁸ And the five groups of being elucidated in the Buddhist scriptures are thus :

Whatever there are of corporeal things, whether past, present or future, one’s own or external, gross or subtle, lofty or low, far or near, all that belongs to the corporeality group : The same argument is repeated for the other four groups of being, such as feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness-groups.³⁹

These are the five aspects which appear to the untrained or ignorant man as his “permanent soul” or “self” (*attā*). It is said that the analysis of the five *khandhas* serves as the detailed illustration of the nature of the five-fold primary analysis of a being. Hence, the purpose of analysis mentioned in the *Vibhaṅga* of the *Abhidhamma* deserves to be quoted here:

It is to show to those who may accept the idea of the existence of a soul or spirit as a constituent part of a being that such a concept is unnecessary to the understanding of the structural nature of beings. Whatever may be observed or formulated from the behaviour of beings, either in general or in particular, is classified under one or other of the five aggregates.⁴⁰

Generally speaking, the purpose of analysis is to enrich the understanding of man about what he is not, technically called *Anattā*. As Nyanatiloka puts it thus :

What is called individual existence is in reality nothing but a mere process of those mental and physical phenomena, a process that since time immemorial has been going on, and that also after death will still continue for unthinkably long periods of time. These five groups, however, neither singly nor collectively constitute any self-dependent real ego-entity, or personality (*attā*), nor is there to be found any such entity apart from them. Hence the belief in such an ego-entity or personality, as real in the ultimate sense, proves a mere illusion.⁴¹

The five *khandhas*, when examined carefully, appear empty just like the bubbles on the Ganges. To quote the similar parables: “The body is like a lump of foam, the feelings like a water-

³⁶ Nyanaponika (Ed.), *Buddhist Dictionary : Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*, (Kandy : BPS. 1980), p. 99 ; Cf. S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, I. (Delhi ; MB, 1975), p. 93.

³⁷ T.W. Rhys Davids (Ed.), *Pāli-English Dictionary* (Delhi : Oriental Reprint : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1975), p.49.

³⁸ *SN*. I. 135 ; *The Kindred Sayings*, III. 41 ; *DN*. II. 307 ; *Vbh*. I. 170 : “*Yathā hi aṅgasambhārā, hoti saddo ratho iti ; evam khandhesu santesu, hoti satto ti sammati.*”

³⁹ *SN*. III. 48 ; *The Kindred Sayings*, III. 41 ; *DN*. II. 307 ; *Vbh*. I. *The Book of Analysis*, pp. 1-16 ; *Comp*. p. 185 ; *MN*. III. ; *Vism*. 443.

⁴⁰ *The Book of Analysis (Vibhaṅga)*, Tr. P. A. Thittila, p. xxii.

⁴¹ Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, p. 99.



bubble, perception like a void mirage, mental formations like a plantain-tree and consciousness like jugglery.”⁴² It is said that the human personality is comparable to the sound of a *Vīṇā*, a music instrument. By the combination of its various parts there is sound, the music cannot be found by breaking up the *Vīṇā* into small pieces and finally by burning it because the music is unreal and impermanent unity. It is like a man who has nothing to identify oneself with the five *khandhas* even by investigating them thoroughly.⁴³

8. Conclusion

The same connotation of the five *khandhas* is said to have been explained by the Buddha both in the *Majjhima-Nikāya*⁴⁴ and in the *Samyutta-Nikāya*⁴⁵ to a certain monk who asked many questions regarding the nature of the five *khandhas*, already mentioned earlier. The emphasis on it here is that the *khandhas* remain as long as the knowledge of their true character is not attained ; “with right insight one can understand things as they really are.”⁴⁶ Their contemplation leads to the recognition of their character as impermanence, suffering and no-self.⁴⁷ Having understood the relative existence of the five *khandhas*, there will be no idea of eternalism (*sassata-ditthi*) and annihilationism (*ucchedaditthi*). A man who knows how to analyse the constituent of life will contribute to his training of analytical thought. He will essentially see various things as their reality in the aspect of objective (*sabhāva-visaya*), not of subjective (*saka-visaya*). Because in ultimate analysis all things are *sankhara* (conditioned things). He knows correctly the conditioned as conditioned. In Buddhism the personality factors are conditioned processes (*paticcasamuppāda kho panime yadidam pancuppādānakkhandha*).⁴⁸ It may be noted here that the five *khandhas* are just classificatory groupings; they should not be conceived as compact entities (heaps or bundles), for actually only single representative of these groups, mostly variable, can arise with any state of consciousness. The five *khandhas* are frequently mentioned with the eighteen *dhātus* and twelve *āyatanas*.⁴⁹ Our discussion here will thus be mainly based on the *khandha-vagga* and the *salāyatana-vagga* of the *Samyutta-Nikāya*, the *Mahāhatthipadopama-Sutta* and the *Mahārāhulovāda-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikāya*, the *Dhammasaṅgānī* and *Vibhaṅga* of the *Abhidhamma*, the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha*,⁵⁰ since the psycho-physical analysis of man was not yet systematized in early scriptures. It was owing to the endeavours of the *Abhidhamma* teachers that various aspects of human existence were analysed and systematized very elaborately.

⁴² SN. III. 139.

⁴³ SN. IV. 196. “*Evam eva kho ... bhikkhu rūpam samanعاتi yāvata rūpassa gati, vedanam ... saññam ... sañkhāre ... viññānam samenesati yāvata viññānassa gati, ... ahan ti vā mamanti vā asmiti vā tam pi tassa na hoti.*”

⁴⁴ MN. III. 16.

⁴⁵ SN. III. 101.

⁴⁶ SN. III. 101 ; *The Kindred Sayings*, III. P. 87.

⁴⁷ SN. III. 128, 167 ; AN. V. 109. “*Na kiñci attānamvā attaniyam vā pañcesu upādānakkhandesu.*”

⁴⁸ MN. I. 191 ; SN. III. 115.

⁴⁹ SN. I. 134. “*Khadhā ca dhātus cha ca āyatanā ime hetum paticca sambhūtā hetubhaṅgā nirujjhare.*”

⁵⁰ SN. III. & SN. IV. ; MN. No. 28 ; 62.



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