

THE FIVE KHANDHAS: THEIR TREATMENT IN THE
NIKĀYAS AND EARLY ABHIDHAMMA

The five *khandhas* – *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras*, *viññāṇa* – clearly constitute one of those primary lists of terms that form the basis of much of Buddhist teaching as presented in the Pali Canon. A major *vagga* of the *Samyutta-nikāya* is devoted almost entirely to their treatment,¹ while they also feature repeatedly as categories of analysis in the early *abhidhamma* texts. Yet such accounts of the five *khandhas* as are found in contemporary studies of Indian Buddhism are for the most part of a summary nature, confining themselves to a brief discussion of each of the *khandhas* and the part they play in the breaking down of man into various constituent elements.² It does not seem inappropriate in such circumstances to attempt a clearer assessment of the place and understanding of the five *khandhas* in early Buddhist literature.³

Although the *khandhas* feature widely in the Pali Canon, they are found most characteristically treated in the *Majjhima-* and *Samyutta-nikāyas*, and certain sections of the *abhidhamma* texts. In the *Vinaya-piṭaka* and *Dīghanikāya* they are mentioned really only in passing, while in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* they feature only sporadically, conspicuous by their absence from the section on “fives”.⁴ When we begin to consider as a whole the body of *nikāya* material concerned with the *khandhas*, what we find is the sequence of terms *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa* being treated according to a number of recurring formulae which are interwoven and applied in various contexts. Out of this there gradually emerges a more or less comprehensive account of the five *khandhas*. It is to a consideration of the principal *khandha* formulae that the greater part of this paper is devoted, while reference is also made to the early *abhidhamma* material where this is found to be of help in elucidating the general understanding of the *khandhas* in early Buddhist thought.

The sequence *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras*, *viññāṇa* is largely taken as given in the *nikāyas*. We find very little in terms of formal explanation of either the sequence as a whole or of the individual terms. What there is, is confined to a few stock and somewhat terse definitions.⁵ But before turning

to the *nikāya khandha* formulae, it is perhaps as well to comment briefly on these five basic terms and also, at slightly greater length, on the subject of *khandha* and *upādānakkhandha*.

Rūpa is typically defined as the four elements earth, water, fire and wind, and *rūpa* dependent upon (*upādāya*) them. What is clear, both from the *nikāyas*' elaboration of this by reference to parts of the human body, and from the list of twenty-seven items of *rūpa* distinguished in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, is the extent to which the early Buddhist account of *rūpa* focuses on the physical world as experienced by a sentient being — the terms of reference are decidedly body-endowed-with-consciousness (*saviññāṇaka kāya*).⁶ In view of this, the tendency to understand and translate *rūpa* as "matter" is rather misleading.⁷ The connotations of the word "matter" in the Western philosophical tradition, its association with concepts such as inert "stuff" or "substance", are hardly appropriate either to the treatment of *rūpa* in the *nikāyas* and early *abhidhamma*, or to *rūpa*'s literal meanings of "form", "shape" or "appearance".

The translation of *vedanā* as "feeling" seems more straightforward, although the *nikāyas*' understanding of *vedanā* is not without its difficulties. It is usually defined as being pleasant (*sukha*), unpleasant (*dukkha*), or not-unpleasant-not-pleasant (*adukkhamasukha*), and is said to be either bodily (*kāyika*) or mental (*cetasika*).⁸ The significance of the three kinds of *vedanā* seems to lie in their being seen as three basic reactions to experience which possess a certain potential to influence and govern an individual's subsequent responses in either skilful or unskilful ways.⁹

The stock definition of *saññā* in the *nikāyas* illustrates its function by reference to various colours. It is this, it seems, that has led translators to render *saññā* in the context of the *khandhas* as "perception". Yet, as Alex Wayman has pointed out, there are a number of passages in which the translation "perception" fails to make sense of the *nikāyas*' usage of *saññā* as a technical term. Wayman suggests that it is the word "idea" that should regularly be employed as a translation of *saññā*.¹⁰ This certainly seems to make better sense of the technical usage in connection with the *khandhas*. A *saññā* of, say, "blue" then becomes, not so much a passive awareness of the visual sensation we subsequently agree to call "blue", but rather the active noting of that sensation, and the recognising of it as "blue" — that is, more or less, the idea of "blueness". This appears to be in general how *saññā* is understood in the commentarial literature.¹¹

The *nikāyas* define *saṃkhāras* primarily in terms of will or volition (*cetanā*); they also describe them as putting together (*abhisamkharonti*) each of the *khandhas* in turn into something that is put-together (*saṃkhata*).⁵ In this way *saṃkhāras* are presented as conditioning factors conceived of as active volitional forces. *Cetanā* is, of course, understood as *kamma* on the mental level,¹² and in the early *abhidhamma* texts all those mental factors that are considered to be specifically skilful (*kusala*) or unskilful (*akusala*) fall within the domain of *saṃkhārakkhandha*.¹³ Thus it is that the composition of *saṃkhārakkhandha* leads¹⁴ the way in determining whether a particular arising of consciousness constitutes a skilful or an unskilful *kamma*. All this accords well with the *nikāyas*' singling out of *cetanā* as characteristic of the nature of *saṃkhāras*.

In many *nikāya* passages *viññāṇa* is apparently used generally to characterise the fact of self-awareness of self-consciousness.¹⁵ An interesting section of the *Mahāvedalla-sutta* is devoted to a discussion of the nature of the relationship between *viññāṇa*, *vedanā* and *saññā*.¹⁶ *Viññāṇa* is here characterised as discriminating (*viññāṇāti*) the three feelings, *vedanā* as feeling (*vedeti*) the three feelings, and *saññā* as noting (*saññāṇāti*) yellow, blue, etc. The passage then goes on to say that these three states (*dharmas*) should be considered closely connected (*samsatṭha*) since "what one feels, that one notes; what one notes, that one discriminates". Thus *vedanā*, *saññā* and *viññāṇa* are here apparently viewed as operating together as different aspects of the process of being aware of a particular object of consciousness. *Viññāṇa* can perhaps best be characterised as awareness or consciousness of things in relation to each other; this seems to relate both the notion of self awareness and that of discriminating various objects.

Finally we may note how the *khandha-saṃyutta* explains *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa* each in terms of six classes corresponding to consciousness that is related to the five senses of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body, and sixthly mind⁵ — that is, the six internal spheres of sense (*saḷāyatana*).

KHANDHA AND UPĀDĀNAKKHANDHA

Within the *nikāyas* the five terms *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa* are variously designated both *khandhas*¹⁷ and *upādānakkhandhas*, and in addition are sometimes treated in sequence without either designation.¹⁸

A *khandha-saṃyutta* passage states that the *khandhas* are to be considered

upādānakkhandhas only when they are with *āsavas* (*sāsava*) and subject to grasping (*upādāniya*).¹⁹ In another passage that recurs several times in the *nikāyas*, the question is asked whether *upādāna* should be considered the same as the *upādānakkhandhas* or whether there is *upādāna* apart from them.²⁰ In reply it is stated that although *upādāna* is not the same as the five *upādānakkhandhas* there is no *upādāna* apart from them; *upādāna* is then defined as “whatever is will and passion (*chandarāga*) in respect of the five *upādānakkhandhas*”. Clearly the *nikāyas* understand *upādāna* as some form of attachment that falls within the general compass of the *khandhas*. The early *abhidhamma* texts clarify *upādāna*’s relationship to the *khandhas* under three principal headings: active grasping (*upādāna*), subject to grasping (*upādāniya*), and the product of grasping (*upādīṇṇa*). *Upādāna* as an active force is confined to *saṃkhārakkhandha*, although all five *khandhas* are potentially the objects of *upādāna* — that is, are *upādāniya*; similarly all five *khandhas* are said to be in some measure the products of *upādāna* — that is, *upādīṇṇa*.²¹ By following procedures which are adumbrated in the early *abhidhamma* texts, it is possible to detail further *upādāna*’s relationship to the *khandhas*. The text of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* begins by setting out the triplets and couplets of the *abhidhamma mātikā*, and then by way of explaining the categories of the first triplet goes on to detail the constitution of various arisings of consciousness (*citta*); the categories of the remaining triplets and couplets are explained only in brief. By treating the *cittas* in terms of the categories of the relevant triplets and couplets exactly when and in what measure the three terms *upādāna*, *upādāniya* and *upādīṇṇa* apply to the *khandhas* might be specified in detail. The early *abhidhamma* texts also state that *rūpakkhanda* is always considered to be with *āsavas* and subject to grasping, and that the only time when the four mental *khandhas* are not such — that is, in *nikāya* terminology, are not *upādānakkhandhas* — is on the occasions of the four *ariya* paths and fruits.²²

Returning to the immediate problem of how exactly early Buddhist thought conceives of *upādāna*, we find that the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* by way of explanation of greed (*lobha*) lists a whole series of terms including passion (*rāga*), craving (*taṇhā*) and *upādāna*.²³ It does not appear that these terms are intended to be understood as mere equivalents either in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* or in the *nikāyas*. Within the *nikāyas* each of these terms is characteristically employed in particular contexts with more or less fixed terms of reference. Thus the *khandhas* are not designated the *lobhakkhandhas* or the *taṇhakkhandhas*,

for example. It seems to follow from this that the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* intends *rāga*, *taṇhā* and *upādāna* to be understood as particular manifestations of greed in general.

The usage of the term *upādāna* in Pali seems to involve the association of the following range of ideas: “taking up”, “grasping”, and hence “feeding”, and lastly “food”, “fuel” and “basis”.²⁴ Since the term *upādāna* is used in such close association with the *khandha* analysis, and since that analysis is used in the *nikāyas* especially as a way of looking at existence and experience at the level of the apparently stable individual being,²⁵ the notion of *upādāna* and the significance of its relationship to the *khandhas* can, I think, be summed up as follows. As grasping, *upādāna* is that greed which is the fuel and basis for the manifestation and coming together of the *khandhas* in order that they might constitute a given individual or being. This is, of course, exactly the truth of the arising of *dukkha* (see below). But in particular *upādāna* seems to be seen as greed of a degree and intensity that is able to support the reappearance and coming together of the *khandhas* from one existence to the next. To put it another way, if craving has attained to the degree of *upādāna*, then the reappearance of the *khandhas* in the form of an individual being inevitably follows. This tallies quite precisely with *upādāna*’s position in the sequence of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, falling as it does after *vedanā* and *taṇhā*, and before becoming (*bhava*) and birth (*jāti*). Indeed a number of *nikāya khandha* formulae link directly into the *paṭiccasamuppāda* chain at the point of *upādāna*:

For one who finds pleasure in *rūpa* . . . *vedanā* . . . *saññā* . . . *saṃkhāras* . . . *viññāṇa*, who welcomes them and becomes attached to them, there arises delight (*nandi*); that which is delight in respect of *rūpa* (etc.) is *upādāna*; for him dependent on *upādāna* there is becoming, dependent on becoming there is birth, dependent on birth there is old age and death — grief, sorrow, lamentation and despair come into being. Thus is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.²⁶

To sum up, the term *upādānakkhandha* signifies the general way in which the *khandhas* are bound up with *upādāna*; the simple *khandha*, universally applicable, is used in the *nikāyas* and especially the *abhidhamma* texts as a neutral term, allowing the specific aspects of, for example, *upādāna*’s relationship to the *khandhas* to be elaborated.

THE PRINCIPAL KHANDHA FORMULAE

(i) *The "Totality" Formula*

The totality of each *khandha* is referred to in the *nikāyas* according to the following formula: Whatever *rūpa* . . . *vedanā* . . . *saññā* . . . *saṃkhāras* . . . *viññāṇa* are past, future or present, within or without, gross or subtle, inferior or refined, are far or near.²⁷ The various terms of this formula are not explained further in the *nikāyas*, but the *Vibhaṅga*, which takes this formula as characteristic of the *suttanta* account of the *khandhas*, furnishes us with an illustration of their application to each of the *khandhas* in turn.²⁸

Leaving aside the question of the exact understanding of the nature of time in early Buddhist texts, the collective term past (*atīta*), not-come (*anāgata*), just arisen (*paccuppanna*) is straightforward.

The pair within/without (*ajjhattam/bahiddhā*) is explained as relative, having as its point of reference any given individual: one's own *khandhas* are within, while the *khandhas* of other beings are without. Interestingly, when this pair of terms is thus applied to *rūpakkhandha*, inanimate *rūpa* is left unaccounted for,²⁹ as is recognised by the commentarial appendix to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, which adds that it should be understood as without.³⁰ This lack of attention to inanimate *rūpa* further illustrates the way in which the analysis of *rūpa* centres around the sentient being. This orientation is, of course, relevant to the *khandha* analysis as a whole.

As far as their application to the four mental *khandhas* is concerned, the remaining pairs of terms are also explained as relative. That is to say, a particular manifestation of *vedanā*, for example, is distinguished as gross or subtle (*olārika/sukhuma*), inferior or refined (*hīna/pañīta*), far or near (*dure/santike*) in relation to another particular manifestation of *vedanā*. The principles according to which the distinctions between gross and subtle etc. are made involve the discernment of increasing degrees of excellence within the compass of the four mental *khandhas*. For example, although in general not-unpleasant-not-pleasant feeling is said to be subtle when compared to pleasant and unpleasant feeling, pleasant feeling occurring in conjunction with one of the four *ariya* paths or fruits would be subtle in relation to not-unpleasant-not-pleasant feeling occurring in conjunction with the fourth *jhāna* of the form sphere, since the former is without *āsavas* while the latter is with *āsavas*.

As for the application of these pairs of terms to *rūpakkhandha*, although the

inferior/refined pair is again treated as merely relative, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* and *Vibhaṅga* can be interpreted as taking each part of the two pairs gross/subtle and far/near as referring to fixed items in the *abhidhamma* list of twenty-seven kinds of *rūpa*. Yet, as Karunadasa has pointed out, the *Vibhaṅga* should possibly be read as indicating that the far/near pair could be applied in a number of different ways, and moreover the various ancient schools of *abhidharma* are not consistent in the way they interpret the application of these terms to *rūpa*.³¹ One is left with the suspicion that in the case of *rūpakkhanda* too these terms were employed in a number of different ways to indicate the variety to be discerned in *rūpa*. Whether or not the details of the *Vibhaṅga* exposition are accepted as valid for the *nikāyas*, it seems clear that this formula is intended to indicate how each *khandha* is to be seen as a class of states, manifold in nature and displaying a considerable variety and also a certain hierarchy.

(ii) *The khandhas and the Four Noble Truths*

It has been usual for scholars to explain the *khandhas* as the analysis of the human individual into psycho-physical phenomena. Yet an expression of the matter in just such terms is not exactly characteristic of the texts. The preferred *nikāya* explanation of the *khandhas* would seem to be in terms of the first of the four noble truths — the *khandhas* are presented as one way of defining what is *dukkha*. The stock *nikāya* statement of the truths explains *dukkha* as “in short the five *upādānakkhandhas*”.³² What is interesting is the way in which various terms are substituted for *dukkha*. For example, we find in the *khandha-samyutta*:

I will teach you, *bhikkhus*, *sakkāya* (the existing body), its arising, its ceasing, and the way leading to its ceasing. And what, *bhikkhus*, is *sakkāya*? The five *upādānakkhandhas* should be said.³³

The well known “burden” *sutta* is also in principle a variation on the four-truth theme. The burden (*bhāra*) is explained as the five *upādānakkhandhas* in accordance with its standing for *dukkha*, while clinging to the burden (*bhārādāna*) and laying down the burden (*bhāranikkhepana*) are explained according to the standard definitions of the second and third truths respectively. The troublesome taking up of the burden (*bhārahāra*), defined as the person (*puggala*), is inserted between the first and the second truths, while the fourth truth is omitted altogether; thus the usual pattern is departed from.³⁴

Another frequently quoted *nikāya* statement that follows the structure of the four truths substitutes world (*loka*) for *dukkha*:

In this fathom-long body endowed with sentience and mind, I declare the world, its arising, its ceasing and the way leading to its ceasing.³⁵

In addition, we find *dukkha* as the first truth defined, not in terms of the five *upādānakkhandhas*, but in terms of the six internal spheres of sense (*ajjhāttika āyatana*).

Within this general context can be placed the verse attributed to the nun Vajira and referred to in the *Milindapañha*.³⁷ This states that just as the word “chariot” is applied to what is really a sum of parts, a being (*satta*) is the conventional designation (*sammuti*) for the *khandhas*; there is, in fact, just *dukkha*. A *khandha-samyutta* play on the word *satta* finds a hidden significance in this explanation:

“A being” (*satta*) is said; in what measure is “a being” said? Whatever is will, passion, delight and craving in respect of *rūpa . . . vedanā . . . saññā . . . saṃkhāras . . . viññāna* is being attached (*satta*) thereto, is being strongly attached (*visatta*) thereto; for this reason “a being” is said.³⁸

What begins to emerge, then, is a series of correspondences: *dukkha*, the five *upādānakkhandhas*, *sakkāya*, *bhāra*, *loka*, the six internal *āyatanas*, *satta*. All these expressions apparently represent different ways of characterising the given data of experience or conditioned existence, and are also seen as drawing attention to the structure and the sustaining forces behind it all. In this way the *khandhas* begin to take on something of a wider significance than is perhaps appreciated when they are seen merely as a breaking down of the human individual into constituent parts.

By way of expanding on the theme of the *khandhas* as *dukkha*, a whole series of designations is applied to them both collectively and individually. Most frequent in this respect is the standard sequence of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* (see below). To this a fourth term, *saṃkhata* (conditioned), and also a fifth, *vadhaka* (murderous), are occasionally added.³⁹ One treatment describes each *khandha* in turn as, in addition to *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, *roga* (sickness), *gaṇḍa* (a boil), *salla* (a barb), *agha* (misery), *ābādha* (an affliction), *para* (other), *paloka* (unstable), *suñña* (empty).⁴⁰ The *khandhas* are also called embers (*kukkuḷa*); they are on fire (*āditta*); they are Māra, and by grasping them one is bound to Māra.⁴¹ All this acts as vivid illustration of the danger inherent in attachment to the *khandhas*. Images of disease,

bodily affliction and burning abound in the *nikāyas*; the effect in the present context is one of alluding to and drawing together various *nikāya* passages.

Formulae which may be considered as adaptations of the four-noble-truth structure are used to take up the theme of the *khandhas* as *dhammas* that are to be fully understood (*pariññeyya*).⁴² Thus ignorance (*avijjā*) is defined as not knowing in turn *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras*, *viññāṇa*, their arising, their ceasing and the way leading to their ceasing; conversely knowledge is knowing all of these.⁴³ In similar vein is the formula that runs: Thus is *rūpa* (etc.), thus is its arising (*samudaya*), thus is its passing away (*atthagama*). This is one of the most frequently occurring *nikāya khandha* formulae, and is usually found as an explanation of the expression, “he dwells contemplating the rise and fall of the five *upādānakkhandhas*” – an expression used especially in contexts where the process of the gaining of that insight that constitutes the destruction of the *āsavas* is being described.⁴⁴

The theme of the arising and passing away of the *khandhas* is interwoven in a cycle of *khandha-samyutta suttas* with that of their pleasure (*assāda*), their danger (*ādīnava*) and the escape from them (*nissarana*); this apparently brings together all the various aspects which make for the full understanding of the nature of the *khandhas*.⁴⁵

(iii) *The anicca-dukkha-anattā Formula*

Perhaps the most well known of the *khandha* formulae is that which demonstrates *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa* in turn as *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. In its fullest form this treatment of the *khandhas* is found in the *Vinaya-piṭaka* placed as a second utterance after the Benares discourse on the four noble truths.⁴⁶ At its core is a series of questions and answers in the following pattern:

What do you think, is *rūpa* (etc.) permanent or impermanent? Impermanent. That which is impermanent, is that suffering or happiness? Suffering. Is it right to regard that which is suffering, of a changeable nature, as “This is mine, I am this, this is my self (*attā*)”? No.

This series of questions and answers, applied to *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa*, occurs regularly throughout the *khandha-samyutta* and also elsewhere in the *nikāyas*.⁴⁷ Significantly, as a method of demonstrating *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* the formula’s use is not confined to the five *khandhas*, but is also applied by the *nikāyas* to a whole series of categories.

In the *Cūḷa-Rāhulovāda-sutta* we find it applied to eye, visible forms, eye-contact and to “what is connected with *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa* and arises dependent upon eye-contact”; ear, nose, tongue, body and mind are all treated in a parallel fashion.⁴⁸ The *sutta* thus understands thirty consecutive rehearsals of the formula. The *saḷāyatana-saṃyutta* also employs this formula in respect of a similar list of categories.⁴⁹ The *Rāhula-saṃyutta* treats a total of fifty-nine categories in this manner: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind; the six corresponding kinds of object; six corresponding classes each of *viññāṇa*, *saṃphassa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *sañcetanā* and *taṇhā*; six elements (*dhātu*), namely earth, fire, wind, water, consciousness, and space; finally the five *khandhas*.⁵⁰ Bearing in mind that the six classes of *vedanā*, *saññā*, *sañcetanā* and *viññāṇa* are also used to explain the appropriate *khandhas*, it is apparent that the *khandhas* feature widely in this exhaustive treatment apart from their appearance at its close. One is tempted to suggest that this seemingly repetitive list conveys a certain movement from the particular to the more general along the following lines. According to its *nikāya* definition, eye, visible forms and eye-consciousness together constitute eye-contact – similarly for the other senses. Dependent upon sense contact there arises subsequent *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa*. The significance of the appearance of the *khandha* sequence at the close of the *Rāhula-saṃyutta* list seems to lie in the fact that it is seen as integrating and synthesising what comes before into a whole – a whole that is still, however, *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*.

(iv) *Attā, anattā and sakkāyadiṭṭhi*

The conclusion that the *anicca-dukkha-anattā* formula focuses upon is that each of the *khandhas* is to be seen by right wisdom as it really is: “This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my *attā*.” It is the attainment of this vision that distinguishes the *ariya sāvakā* (noble hearer) from the *assutavanta puthujjana* (ignorant ordinary man).⁵¹ A fourfold formula applied to each of the *khandhas* in turn indicates twenty ways in which the *puthujjana* falls short of this vision: he views *rūpa* (etc.) as the *attā*, the *attā* as possessing *rūpa* (etc.), *rūpa* (etc.) as in the *attā*, the *attā* as in *rūpa* (etc.).⁵² In both the *nikāyas* and the *abhidhamma* texts these twenty ways of viewing the *attā* in relation to the *khandhas* are used to explain in detail *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* (the view that the body is real).⁵³ No doubt they are seen as operating at various levels in the psyche of the *puthujjana*, yet that they are seen as having a particular

relevance to notions of the *attā* associated with various meditation attainments seems likely, given the importance of such concerns in the *nikāya* context. Thus a passage that occurs several times in the *nikāyas* treats the four *jhānas* and the first three formless attainments successively, stating that whatever there is connected with *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa* at those levels is to be seen as (amongst other things) *anattā*.⁵⁴ This is said to result either in the destruction of the *āsavas*, i.e. arahatship, or in the abandoning of the five lower fetters (*orambhāgiya saṃyojana*), i.e. the attainment of nonreturnership. *Sakkāyadiṭṭhi* is, of course, counted among these five lower fetters.

That the abandoning of *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* does not of itself involve the complete destruction of the *āsavas* is a point taken up in a *khandha-samyutta* discourse⁵⁵ in which the venerable Khemaka is asked by a number of *theras* whether or not he views anything as *attā* or as belonging to the *attā* in respect of the five *upādānakkhandhas*. Khemaka replies that he does not; he is, however, not an arahat since the general notion “I am” still persists within the compass of the *khandhas*, although it does not take the form of a specific view, “I am this”. He concludes, “when the five lower fetters have been abandoned . . . there yet remains a residuum of the conceit ‘I am’, of the desire ‘I am’, of the tendency ‘I am’.”

The abandoning of the twenty modes of *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* is, then, a central element in the transition from *puthujjana* to *ariya sāvakas*. Any sense of individual existence that subsequently persists, is of too subtle a nature to act as the basis for a definite view which might identify the *attā* with all five *khandhas* or any one of them.

The formula of the twenty modes of *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* is also employed in the *nikāyas* to explain in detail the statement that, “whatever *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* view the *attā* in diverse ways, they all view the five *upādānakkhandhas* or one of them”.⁵⁶ In other words, there can be no specific views concerning the *attā* apart from the twenty ways of viewing the *attā* in relation to the five *khandhas*. Now, a number of scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the *nikāyas* fail to categorically deny the *attā* and declare only that the *khandhas* are *anattā*.⁵⁷ Yet, when this is taken in the context of the former statement, it must be added that the *nikāyas* refuse to allow the *attā* as a meaningful concept apart from the five *khandhas*, that is apart from views or notions of the *attā* that are ultimately to be abandoned. The *attā* is in this way squeezed out to the *nikāyas*’ ultimate frame of reference,

and deliberately confined to the level of speculations and views. This can be seen, up to a point, as a challenge to those *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas* who maintained views concerning the *attā* to explain the exact nature of that *attā*. Their response seems to have been to accuse the Buddha of declaring the destruction of the existing being, or to demand an answer to the question of whether or not the Tathāgata exists after death. The Tathāgata is untraceable (*ananuvejja*), the question of his existence or not after death is unexplained (*avyākata*), was the reply.⁵⁸

(v) *The Arising of dukkha: The khandhas as paṭiccasamuppanna*

Precisely because the *puthujjana* views the *khandhas* as his *attā*, and is attached to them through the workings of “will, passion, delight, craving, and that clinging and grasping which are determinations, biases and tendencies of mind”,⁵⁹ there arises for him “grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair”. The *nikāyas* thus convey a picture of a complete spectrum and network of attachment, and, as indicated above in the course of the discussion of *upādāna*, a number of *khandha* treatments link directly into the *paṭiccasamuppāda* chain. The continued manifestation of the *khandhas* is thus presented as the direct consequence of attachment in respect of the *khandhas*.

In addition to this kind of treatment, which has as its scale a lifetime or a series of lifetimes, a number of *nikāya* passages focus attention on the process of the arising of the *khandhas* in the context of a given sequence of consciousness. A section of the *Mahāhatthipadopamā-sutta* describes the case of one who knows that there is nothing in respect of *rūpa* of which he can say “I” or “mine” or “I am”.⁶⁰ If he is insulted by others, he knows, “There has arisen for me this unpleasant *vedanā* born of ear-contact; it is caused (*paṭicca*), not uncaused (*appaṭicca*).” He is thus said to see that contact (*phassa*) is *anicca*, that *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa* are *anicca*. The *sutta* goes on to state that a manifestation (*pātubhāva*) in any section of consciousness (*viññāṇabhāga*) is to be considered as the result of three conditions, namely that the appropriate bodily organ — eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind — is intact (*aparibhinna*), that corresponding external objects — visible forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles or mental states — come within its range (*āpātha*), and finally that there is an appropriate bringing together (*samannāhāra*).⁶¹ When these conditions are fulfilled “whatever *rūpa* that thus comes into being is included (*saṃgahaṃ gacchati*) in *rūpupādānakkhandha*”; likewise for *vedanā* and *vedanupādānakkhandha*,

and so on. The *sutta* understands all this as illustrating *paṭiccasamuppāda*, and comments that what is causally arisen (*paṭiccasamuppanna*) is the five *upādānakkhandhas*.

This kind of treatment, then, considers the arising of the *khandhas* dependent on any one of the six internal sense spheres. The sequence of terms that thus emerges — (*rūpa*), *phassa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras*, *viññāṇa* — parallels the initial pentad of *dhammas* that the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* lists for the arising of each consciousness, namely *phassa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *cetanā*, *citta*,⁶² and invites a certain comparison. The precise nature of the time scale of the consciousness process envisaged by the *nikāya* treatment is ambiguous — perhaps intentionally so, while the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* apparently reduces the scale to its base unit: the individual arising of *citta* at any given time (*samaya*).⁶³ Yet what is common to both the *suttanta* and *abhidhamma* material here is the concern to consider how the *khandhas* or how *dhammas* stand in relationship to each other, how they are conditioned and sustained within a particular consciousness sequence, however that might be conceived.

THE KHANDHA-VIBHAṄGA

The *khandha-vibhaṅga* is the first of the eighteen chapters that make up the *Vibhaṅga*. It is divided into three sections, the first of which, dealing with the *suttanta* treatment of the *khandhas*, has already been referred to above. The second section, the *abhidhamma-bhājanīya*,⁶⁴ involves the analysis of the totality of each of the five *khandhas* in turn according to how each is, in the first place, a whole, and then how each is divisible into two kinds, three kinds, four kinds and so on. This procedure is taken as far as an elevenfold division in the case of *rūpakkhanda*, and as far as a tenfold division in the case of the other *khandhas*, although for the latter the text subsequently goes on to indicate additional ways of sevenfold, twenty-fourfold, thirtyfold and manifold division. The bulk of the section is taken up with the application of the relevant triplets and couplets from the *abhidhamma mātikā* to each of the four mental *khandhas*; this provides a whole series of ways of threefold and twofold division. By taking each applicable triplet with each applicable couplet in turn, according to all possible permutations, the *Vibhaṅga* indicates in the region of one thousand different sets of divisions for each of these four *khandhas* — the precise number varying according to the number of triplets and couplets relevant in each case.

The final section of the *khandha-vibhaṅga*, the *pañhāpucchaka*, takes the form of a series of questions and answers, again concerned with how the *khandhas* relate to the *abhidhamma* triplets and couplets, and as such forms an extension to the *abhidhamma-bhājanīya* treatment.

The emphasis in the *khandha-vibhaṅga* is once again on the complexity and manifold nature of the *khandhas*. In addition, taken in conjunction with the *Dhammasaṅgani* analysis of the various individual arisings of *citta* in terms of the triplets and couplets, the *khandha-vibhaṅga* provides a comprehensive method of classification by which any given conditioned *dhamma* can be classed as *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* or *viññāṇa*, and can be precisely analysed and assessed within the whole scheme of *abhidhamma* and the Buddhist path.

KHANDHA-ĀYATANA-DHĀTU

For the *abhidhamma* texts such as the *Dhammasaṅgani*, *Vibhaṅga* and *Dhātukathā* the *khandhas* form one of the primary category headings by means of which *dharmas* may be classified. Along with the twelve *āyatana*s and eighteen *dhātus*, the five *khandhas* constitute a triad among these *abhidhamma* headings in that they represent three different methods of classifying the totality of *dharmas* that make up conditioned existence. However, unlike the *khandhas*, the *āyatana*s and *dhātus* also take into account the unconditioned, *nibbāna*.⁶⁵ The other headings employed in the *abhidhamma* texts relate, for the most part, to the more specific aspects of Buddhist spiritual practice, for example the *indriyas*, the limbs of *jhāna* and the eightfold path, and so on.

As an indication of the importance of the *khandha-āyatana-dhātu* triad in early Buddhism, it is worth noting a phrase repeated several times in the verses of the *Khuddaka-nikāya*: He/she taught me *dhamma* – the *khandhas*, *āyatana*s and *dhātus*.⁶⁶ Yet when we turn to the four primary *nikāyas*, although the twelve *āyatana*s and eighteen *dhātus* are specifically mentioned in one or two places,⁶⁷ it is significant that the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* fails to provide three corresponding treatments of the *khandhas*, *āyatana*s and *dhātus* as might have been expected. What we do find in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* are the *khandha-saṃyutta* and the *salāyatana-saṃyutta* – two exhaustive treatments, each running to some two hundred pages in the PTS editions and each dominating its respective *vagga*. A much slighter *dhātu-saṃyutta*,

found in the second *vagga* (which is dominated by the treatment of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula), in fact concerns itself with the eighteen *dhātus* only briefly at its opening, being for the most part devoted to the treatment of the various other items also sometimes termed *dhātus* in the *nikāyas*.⁶⁸ On closer examination the *salāyatana-samyutta*, for its part, does not strictly constitute a treatment of the twelve *āyatanas*, but seems rather to represent an approach which is relevant to analysis, from the point of view of *abhidhamma*, by both *āyatana* and *dhātu*.

All this suggests that the *khandha-āyatana-dhātu* triad is not standard in quite the same way for the *Samyutta-nikāya* as it is for the early *abhidhamma* texts. Whether this is best understood as reflecting a difference in the respective concerns of the *nikāya* and *abhidhamma* texts, or whether it indicates that this triad evolved as standard only after the composition of the bulk of the *nikāya* material, is a question that goes beyond the scope of the present paper. Whatever the case, as A. K. Warder has pointed out,⁶⁹ the *khandha-āyatana-dhātu* triad is common to all schools of Buddhism, and is not something confined to the Theravādin *abhidhamma*.

CONCLUSION

To explain the *khandhas* as the Buddhist analysis of man, as has been the tendency of contemporary scholars, may not be incorrect as far as it goes, yet it is to fix upon one facet of the treatment of the *khandhas* at the expense of others. Thus A. B. Keith could write, "By a division which . . . has certainly no merit, logical or psychological, the individual is divided into five aggregates or groups."⁷⁰ However, the five *khandhas*, as treated in the *nikāyas* and early *abhidhamma*, do not exactly take on the character of a formal theory of the nature of man. The concern is not so much the presentation of an analysis of man as object, but rather the understanding of the nature of conditioned existence from the point of view of the experiencing subject. Thus at the most general level *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa* are presented as five aspects of an individual being's experience of the world; each *khandha* is seen as representing a complex class of phenomena that is continuously arising and falling away in response to processes of consciousness based on the six spheres of sense. They thus become the five *upādānakkhandhas*, encompassing both grasping and all that is grasped. As the *upādānakkhandhas* these five classes of states acquire a

momentum, and continue to manifest and come together at the level of individual being from one existence to the next. For any given individual there are, then, only these five *upādānakkhandhas* – they define the limits of his world, they are his world. This subjective orientation of the *khandhas* seems to arise out of the simple fact that, for the *nikāyas*, this is how the world is experienced; that is to say, it is not seen primarily as having metaphysical significance.

Accounts of experience and the phenomena of existence are complex in the early Buddhist texts; the subject is one that is tackled from different angles and perspectives. The treatment of *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa* represents one perspective, the treatment of the six spheres of sense is another.⁷¹ As we have seen, in the *nikāya* formulae the two merge, complementing each other in the task of exposing the complex network of conditions that is, for the *nikāyas*, existence. In the early *abhidhamma* texts *khandha*, *āyatana* and *dhātu* equally become complementary methods of analysing, in detail, the nature of conditioned existence.

The approach adopted above has been to consider the treatment of the five *khandhas* in the *nikāyas* and early *abhidhamma* texts as a more or less coherent whole. This has incidentally revealed something of the underlying structure and dynamic of early Buddhist teaching – an aspect of the texts that has not, it seems, either been clearly appreciated or properly understood, and one that warrants further consideration.

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NOTES

Acknowledgement is due to L. S. Cousins for advice and criticism. Abbreviations of Pali texts are those of *A Critical Pali Dictionary, Epilegomena to Vol. I*, Copenhagen, 1948.

¹ The *Khandha-vagga* (S III): *khandha-saṃyutta*, S III 1–188, followed by the *Rādha-saṃyutta*, S III 188–200, which also treats the *khandhas* in all its *suttas*.

² E.g. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Psychology*, London, 1914, pp. 39–56; A. B. Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon*, Oxford, 1923, p. 85; E. Conze, *Buddhism – Its Essence and Development*, 2nd pbk ed., Oxford, 1974, p. 14; N. Smart, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy*, London, 1964, pp. 42–5; T. O. Ling, *A History of Religion East and West*, London, 1968, pp. 86–7, 131. Fuller discussions seem to be lacking, although some further details may be gleaned from the following: K. Bhattacharya, *L'Ātman-Brahman dans le Bouddhisme Ancien*, Paris, 1973, pp. 109–10, and 'Upadhi, upādi et upādāna', *Mélanges d'indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou*, Paris, 1968, pp. 81–95; Bhikkhu Bodhi, 'Khandha and Upādānakkhandha', *Pali Buddhist*

Review, Vol. I, No. 1, 1976, pp. 91–102; E. Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India*, London, 1962, passim; E. Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*, Louvain, 1958, passim, and *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse*, Vol. IV, pp. 1995–2042; A. O. Lovejoy, 'The Buddhist technical terms *upādāna* and *upādisesa*', JAOS, XIX, 1897, pp. 126–36; A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, 2nd ed., Delhi, 1982, passim.

³ The principal sources are the four primary *nikāyas* (D, M, S, A) with the first three works of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* (Dhs, Vibh, Dhātuk) taken as representative of the early *abhidhamma*.

⁴ Twenty-four M suttas contain some reference to the *khandhas*. They are also mentioned at Vin I 10 (=S V 420) and Vin I 12 (=S III 66), and at D II 35, 301, 305, 307; A. K. Warder, *op. cit.* p. 86, notes that Chinese versions of the (*Mahā-*)*Satipatthāna-sutta* omit the references to the *khandhas*; the *khandhas* are also found in various contexts in the summaries of *nikāya* teaching that constitute the *Saṅgīti-* and *Dasuttara-suttas*: D III 223, 233, 278, 286.

⁵ E.g. *khandha-samyutta* definitions, S III 59–60, 86–7.

⁶ Cf. the following passages: M I 185–90, S III 86, Dhs 134–46.

⁷ Taken for granted and left largely unquestioned in Y. Karunadasa's study, *The Buddhist Analysis of Matter*, Colombo. 1967.

⁸ M I 303.

⁹ See in general the *vedanā-samyutta*, especially S IV 209, 231; cf. also C. Gudmunsen, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism*, London, 1977, pp. 12–4.

¹⁰ A. Wayman, 'Regarding the Translation of the Buddhist Technical Terms *saññā/samjñā*, *viññāna/vijñāna*', *Malalasekera Commemoration Volume*, ed. O. H. de A. Wijesekera, Colombo, 1976, pp. 324–36.

¹¹ Vism XIV 130; cf. Nyanapoika, *Abhidhamma Studies*, Kandy, 3rd ed. 1971, pp. 68–72.

¹² A III 415.

¹³ This is most simply expressed at Dhātuk 9 where the truth of arising and the truth of the path are said to be *saṃkhārakkhandha*; it is elaborated at Dhs 185–225, and at Vibh 63–9 where the various categories of unskillful *dhammas* are treated in terms of the *khandhas*.

¹⁴ Cf. Vism XIV 135.

¹⁵ Cf. S II 94–5, III 9–10, IV 195.

¹⁶ M I 292–3.

¹⁷ The primary meaning of Pali *khandha* (=Skt. *skandha*) would seem to be the trunk of a tree, and then the shoulder or back of a man or an animal. In the Pali Canon the word is also regularly used in a number of expressions in the sense of an accumulation or collection of something, e.g. *bhogakkhandha*, *paññakkhandha*, *dukkhakkhandha*, and often apparently indicating a division or grouping of some kind, cf. *silakkhandha*, *samādhikkhandha*, *paññakkhandha* (e.g. D I 206).

¹⁸ For the three types of reference: (i) e.g. M I 138, S III 66, Dhs, Vibh, Dhātuk passim; (ii) e.g. D III 233, 278, M III 16, S III 26, 83; (iii) e.g. D II 35. Also to be noted are the occurrences of the forms *rūpadhātu*, *vedanādhātu* etc. (e.g. S III 9), and on one occasion in verse of the sequence *rūpa*, *vedayita*, *saññā*, *viññāna*, *saṃkhata* (S I 112), cf. note 34 below.

¹⁹ S III 47.

²⁰ M I 299 – S III 100–1; cf. S III 166–7.

²¹ Four *khandhas* are not *upādāna*, *saṃkhārakkhandha* may or may not be; *rūpakkhandha*

is *upādāniya*, four *khandhas* may or may not be; all five *khandhas* may or may not be *upādāna*, Vibh 67.

²² Dhs 196, 246. The *abhidhamma* view that *rūpakkkhandha* is always *sāsa*, while the other four may or may not be, seems to be paralleled in a *nikāya* passage which first considers how body (*kāya*) and mind (*citta*) are diseased (*atura*), and then how body is diseased but mind is not, S III 3–5.

²³ Dhs 189.

²⁴ See *upādāna*, PTS *Pali-English Dictionary* and *A Critical Pali Dictionary*.

²⁵ This is perhaps most simply summed up in the *nikāya* usage of such expressions as “the manifestation of the *khandhas*” and “the breaking up of the *khandhas*” in part definition of birth and death respectively, usually in the context of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* formula, e.g. M I 49, 50.

²⁶ S III 14; cf. M I 511, S III 94.

²⁷ E. g. M I 138–9, III 16–7, S III 47, 68.

²⁸ The *khandha-vibhaṅga*, *suttanta-bhājanīya*, Vibh 1–12.

²⁹ Presumably because the terms *ajjhataṃ* and *bahiddhā* are used in the *nikāyas* in the context of “all *rūpa*” (e.g. M I 138), Karunadasa suggests that the two terms are not being used relatively, as in the *abhidhamma* texts, but rather to establish the dichotomy between “matter that constitutes the body of a living being and the matter that obtains outside of it” (*op. cit.* p. 116), but clearly this dichotomy cannot apply in the cases of *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkhāras* and *viññāṇa*.

³⁰ Dhs 241.

³¹ Karunadasa, *op. cit.*, pp. 38–9.

³² Vin I 10 = S V 420, D II 305, M I 48, S III 158.

³³ S III 159, M I 299.

³⁴ S III 25; this is to some extent explained if the *sutta* is viewed as an exposition of the accompanying verse – that statements in verse should not always conform to the patterns of *sutta* prose is not surprising.

³⁵ S I 62, A II 48.

³⁶ S V 426.

³⁷ S I 135, Mil 28.

³⁸ S III 190.

³⁹ S III 56, 114.

⁴⁰ E. g. S III 167–8.

⁴¹ See S III 177, 71, 194, 198, 74.

⁴² D III 278, S III 26, Vibh 426.

⁴³ S III 162–3.

⁴⁴ E. g. D. II 35, M III 115, S III 152.

⁴⁵ S III 13–5, 27–31, 61–5, 81–2, 160–1, 173–6. Cf. the recurring refrain found in the *Brahmajāla-sutta*: The Tathāgata is freed without grasping “having known as they really are the arising of feelings, their passing away, their pleasure, their danger and the escape from them.” D I 17–38, *passim*.

⁴⁶ Vin I 12–3 = S III 66–8.

⁴⁷ E. g. S III 56, 88, 104–5, 187–8, M I 138, 232–4, S II 125, 249.

⁴⁸ M III 277–80.

⁴⁹ S II 244–9.

⁵⁰ S III 18–9; cf. S III 16.

⁵¹ E. g. M III 188, 227, S III 3, 16, 96.

- ⁵³ M I 300, III 17–8, S III 102, Dhs 182.
- ⁵⁴ M I 436, A V 422, cf. 128.
- ⁵⁵ S III 125–33.
- ⁵⁶ S III 63.
- ⁵⁷ E. g. E. Conze, *op. cit.*, p. 39, and E. J. Thomas, *History of Buddhist Thought*, London, 1933, p. 101, n. 2.
- ⁵⁸ M I 140, S III 119; cf. S III 124, where Māra searches in vain for the consciousness of a *bhikkhu* who has just attained arahatship and then died. The most extensive treatment of this aspect of the *khandhas* is found in the *avyākata-samyutta*, S IV 374–403. On this whole question cf. S. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 117–38.
- ⁵⁹ S III 13, cf. 7, 18.
- ⁶⁰ M I 185–6.
- ⁶¹ M I 190–1.
- ⁶² Dhs 9.
- ⁶³ See Nyanaponika, *op. cit.*, pp. 104–26.
- ⁶⁴ Vibh 12–69.
- ⁶⁵ Dhātuk 9.
- ⁶⁶ Ap 563, cf. 42; Thī 43, 69, 103; cf. Th 1255, Nidd I 45.
- ⁶⁷ E. g. D II 302 (six internal and external *āyatana*s), M III 62 (eighteen *dhātus*).
- ⁶⁸ *Salāyatana-samyutta*, S IV 1–204; *dhātu-samyutta*, S II 140–77.
- ⁶⁹ ‘The Mātikā’, introductory essay to the *Mohavicchedanī*, London, 1961, p. xx.
- ⁷⁰ A. B. Keith, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
- ⁷¹ As additional ways of analysing the whole of experience, cf. *nāma-rūpa* (e.g. D I 223) and *diṭṭha, suta, muta, viññāta* (e.g. M I 3, 135).