

Psych Unit Psychiatry And The Five Skandhas

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Psych unit psychiatrists might take up some working, functional insight and vocabulary from the following:

Further, Mahamati, I will explain what characterises the self-nature of the Skandhas. Mahamati, what are the five Skandhas? They are form, (125) sensation, thought, conformation, and consciousness. Mahamati, four of these have no material forms—sensation, thought, conformation, and consciousness. Form, Mahamati, belongs to what is made of the four primary elements, and these elements differ from one another in their individual signs. But the four Skandhas that are without form cannot be reckoned as four, they are like space. For instance, Mahamati, space cannot be numbered, and it is due to our discrimination that it is designated as such; in the same way, Mahamati, the Skandhas that are beyond calculability as they have no number-marks, are not to be predicated as existing and non-existing, and are beyond the four propositions; but to the ignorant they are described as subject to numeration, but not so to the wise.

Again, Mahamati, by the wise the five Skandhas are regarded as thought-constructions, devoid of [dualities such as] otherness and not-otherness; for they are like varieties of forms and objects in a vision, like images and persons in a dream. As they have no better substance for their support, and as they obstruct the passage of noble wisdom, there is what is known as the Skandha-discrimination. This, Mahamati, is what characterises the self-nature of the Skandhas. This discrimination must be discarded by you, and having discarded this, you should declare the truth of solitude. Keeping back the views held by the philosophers, the truth of solitude is to be announced in all the Buddha-assemblies, Mahamati, and thereby the teaching of the egolessness of things is purified and you will enter upon the stage of Far-going (duramgama). Entering upon the stage of Duramgama you will become the master of many Samadhis, and, attaining the will-body (126) you will realise the Samadhi known as Mayopama (Maya-like). Thoroughly conversant with the powers, psychic faculties and self-control, you will be the supporter of all beings like the earth. Mahamati, as the great earth is the supporter of all beings, so is the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva the supporter of all beings.

– The Buddha, The Lankavatara Sutra, section 52, translated by D. T. Suzuki.

First, is the idea of the five skandhas – or, mutually-supporting features of our very selves, that form a nice vocabulary to working with what we see, perceive, and consider, and ultimately, then, how we respond. So it is very important one might say to the Buddhist perspective of working with we-ourselves, this very world, and we-and-the-world.

In this formulation, the skandhas might be seen as mutually supporting, and as form leading to sensation leading to thought leading to conformation leading to consciousness. I've also seen skandhas presented as form, feelings, perceptions, impulse, consciousness. These each have their own particular analytical standpoint, and insight.

This is our very being (which is no-being, as just the unfolding relational, we-and-the-world (see the Diamond Sutra, and nirvana)). In Minsky's idea, it's mind-body-architecture, or in my extension of this, it's mind-body-architecture-philosophy/spirituality-world. In Minsky's idea, it's the mind as a place that is 'combinatorial unfolding interconnected relational action-memes' (my term for what he presents as a significant theory in "The Society Of Mind") – and when it is this-and-the-world, then it is nirvana, since it is realized as such; and nirvana, since it is this-and-the-world, is samsara. This is the Zen view.

But in considering mind studies, and mind-form-being-world, the psych unit psychiatrist should study and consider 'what it is that we are' in terms such as the skandhas, and work with their patients, and those they encounter, as individuals, to discuss and introduce ideas about this. Whether it's Minsky or Buddhism, such a vocabulary needs to be taken up.

This is the very mind, the mind that is before one. It is our understanding, thought, speech, and action – and we-and-the-world.

Note that in the above discourse, the Buddha finds a fault with the five skandhas – if they are not realized, and subject to the error of discrimination. The infinite-nature of space ('that space cannot be numbered') cannot be seen. This is Skandha-discrimination, and in this case its self-nature is perceived. This is an error. Then they obstruct the development and nurturing of noble wisdom. (In this case, we are stuck in a samsaric cycle, and continue about chasing after mirage after mirage, or end up in fruitless loops or dead-ends. It is possible, though, to step from this discrimination, until we have realization and breakthrough.)[1] But if we see the Skandhas 'as the wise see them', then they are, I feel, simply our space, for unfolding noble wisdom, insight, the relational with others, solitude, and our place in the world, and our understanding of we-and-the-world, and action within it.

Psych unit psychiatry needs to scrutinize this, and to see if it comes up with this or its own language and vocabulary – in terms we all can work with, dilemma or not; and to address the challenges and insight and awareness it sees with dimension, vocabulary, logic, reason, realism, the participant, and explanation – as the Buddha tried to, in his clarity and useful way.

Footnotes

1. The New Oxford American Dictionary describes some Buddhist principles such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path, then says also that Buddhism might be seen as a religion of 'ethical conduct, wisdom, and mental discipline'.