
Reviewed by

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This is a useful analysis and overview of Theravāda ideas on the five khandhas (Sanskrit skandhas) as regards: a) the general notion of a khandha, b) their individual natures, c) their relationship to the links (nidānas) of the paticca-samuppāda sequence, and d) the logic of their standard order, which is seen to parallel links 3-10.

The author surveys the khandhas as they are understood within the developed Theravāda tradition, taking into account the canonical texts, plus commentarial literature (giving full Pali of quotes in the notes). In doing so, though, he perhaps tends to treat the tradition as monolithic by downplaying differences of ideas between the Suttas and later texts.

Use has been made of the Mahidol University BUDsIR programme to “search exhaustively for contexts” dealing with the khandhas. However, the study makes apparent the fact that a computer search for certain key words may overlook very relevant passages that do not happen to have those words in them. A good example of this is the fact that in Boisvert’s study of the saṅkhāras, whether as a khandha or nidāna, S.II.65-66 (see Conze et al, Buddhist Texts Through the Ages text 48) is overlooked. This is clearly on the saṅkhāra nidāna, though it does not use the key word saṅkhāra. The passage shows that this nidāna includes the activities of willing, planning and having a latent tendency for something: a key indication the range of meaning of the saṅkhāras.

Boisvert rightly challenges some of the existing translations for individual khandhas, though to prefer “sensation” to “feeling” for vedanā (pp.4-5) is to imply that such states only arise from the five senses and not also from the mind-organ. Regarding another point of translation, he renders sakkāya-diṭṭhi as “the view that the body is existing (permanently)” (p.4), thus overlooking the fact that sakkāya is used at M.I.299 simply to refer to all five khandhas. Sakkāya is thus best seen to mean either “existing group” or “own group”. It does not just refer to the body, and, as a term, has no implications as to the permanence of what it applies to. This implication comes from the views which are held concerning it. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi thus means “Views on the existing group (as being or containing a permanent Self)”.

In the chapter on “The Concept of Khandha”, Boisvert argues that the the five khandha analysis was a Buddhists innovation in Indian thought. He goes on to argue, following Bhikkhu Bodhi, that the difference between the khandhas and “khandhas-as-objects-of-clinging” (upādānakkhandhas) is that the former include the latter as well as what could be called the “bare aggregates”. The “bare aggregates”, here, are the mental aggregates of any person while they are experiencing path or fruit consciousness (which have nibbāna as object). In this state, they are themselves free from clinging and
also beyond the clinging that others may try to focus on them.

In the chapter on “The Rūpakkhandha”, Boisvert uses the translation “matter” for rūpa without much discussion of this (except for pp.46-7). The translation is not necessarily wrong, but it needs arguing for. He analyses how ideas of the four primary elements (earth, water, fire and air) developed in the Abhidhamma, emphasising passages asserting that they cannot exist independently of each other (p.36). He then reviews some key aspects of the twenty-three types of secondary or derived rūpa. In relating these notions to the six senses and their objects, he asserts that the dhammāyatana, the object of mind, belongs to the rūpakkhandha (p.40). Yet while the mind certainly has forms of rūpa among its objects, it can also have purely mental states among its objects. In summarising his discussion of the sense-organs, he also says (p.50) “The first five sense-organs and their respective objects ... are resisting ... and invisible”. As visible objects are “resisting” and “visible”, this is an incorrect summary. In his discussion of the meaning of “internal (ajjhatta)” and “external (bahiddhā)” (p.43, 47), he overlooks the fact that these terms have two types of application. In the first, the khandhas composing a particular “person” are “internal” to them, and anything else is “external”. In the second, the sense-organs are “internal”, and their objects—which might include aspects of a person’s own body or mind, which are “internal” in the first sense—are “external”.

In relating the rūpakkhandha to the nidānas, he rather oddly relates it to “contact” (phassa; better: “stimulation”) (pp.48-51) as well as to the (first five of the) six sense-doors. Here, he overlooks the possibility of relating it to the rūpa aspect of nāma-rūpa. “Contact”, in any case, is part of nāma, not rūpa (M.I.49ff.).

In the chapter on “The Vedanākkhandha”, Boisvert correctly emphasises that vedanā is more than an “anoetic sentience”, as it has some specific content: pleasure etc. (p.53). He then develops a long discussion of the state of saññā-vedayita-nirodha, but this comes as rather a digression in a chapter devoted to understanding vedanā. He argues, correctly I feel, that this particular state of nirodha cannot be simply equated with nibbāna. It is simply one possible route to attaining it. He goes on to point out correctly that vedanā is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the arising of craving, its following nidāna in the paṭicca-samuppāda sequence. He points out a Sutta passage, along with its commentary, which says that vedanās “belonging to the householder” conduce to unwholesome states, while those “belonging to the renouncer” conduce to wholesome states (p.74).

In the chapter on “The Saññākkhandha”, Boisvert emphasises the role of saññā in helping vedanā lead on to craving. He prefers “recognition” as the translation of saññā as it “tends to imply that the subject imposes cer-
tain categories upon the percept in order to classify it” (p.78). Yet while the latter statement is an appropriate one on sañña, “recognition” has the unfortunate connotation that it is always a form of correct knowledge. In English, to say one “recognises” something or someone precludes any error in cognition. Sañña certainly is a form of classificatory, labelling, interpreting activity, but it includes both correct labelling (“recognition”) and incorrect labelling (misinterpretation). For this reason, I prefer the more neutral “cognition”. The more usual “perception” is certainly too broad, as it covers the combined activity of sañña and viññāna, and in any case hardly covers sañña of a mental object.

Boisvert explores the relationship of sañña to views and papañca, which he translates “obsession”. While he acknowledges that sañña can be wholesome, as in recognition of impermanence (p.84), he argues that such wholesome forms of sañña, particularly when they go on to apprehend nibbāna as “the signless”, are not part of the saññākkhandha (p.87). This is odd, as it is precisely such saññas which would be part of the “bare aggregates” alluded to above. Given that sañña processes the object after vedanā has arisen in response to it, Boisvert slips into saying that sañña is itself processing “sensation”: his translation for vedanā (p.88, 89). To say that sañña processes vedanā is not true to the texts, though, for vedanā is simply a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling—it carries no other information. Sañña simply takes as object that which has conditioned the arising of vedanā.

In the chapter “The Saṅkhārakkhandha”, Boisvert first develops a useful discussion of the various ways in which the term saṅkhāra is used in the Pali texts. Here, a key distinction is between the saṅkhāras as saṅkhata, i.e. conditioned, phenomena, and the saṅkhāras as khandha or nidāna: as active “producing” or “generating” conditioner. He also very usefully compares the active saṅkhāras to the process of cooking a meal (p.104). In discussing this active/passive distinction, though, he asserts that anything which is conditioned, which logically would include inanimate natural objects, is conditioned by the active saṅkhāras of a being (p.104, cf. 148). Sometimes, the texts seem to say this, but it is something that needs more discussion. Boisvert finishes the chapter by correctly arguing that the saṅkhārakkhandha and saṅkhāra-nidāna are the same, and that aspects of their working can also be seen in the craving, clinging and becoming nidānas.

In the chapter on “The Viññānakkhandha”, Boisvert argues against the view that viññāna is “bare sensations devoid of any content” (p.117), holding that it is “probably the faculty needed for the cognition of pure percept, of sensation and of conceptualisation as well” (p.118). This is generally correct, but the analysis, here, would have been improved by some
reference to the theory of the cittra-vîthi, or “process of cittas”, found fully developed in the commentaries, in skeletal form in the Paṭṭhāna, and even alluded to in seed form in the Suttas. This is basically the theory of the perceptual process as a series of mind-states which sequentially process any object. In this, what is known by “eye-viññâna” is less than what is known e.g. by following “mind-viññâna” performing the function of “determining”. The first is visual awareness which discerns the presence of a visual object, and also discerns its basic components, labelled by accompanying saññâ. The second is discernment operating at a more abstract level, in unison with accompanying saññâ labelling the aspects so made out. Boisvert goes on to ignore the concept of bhavañga, which is also part of the theory of the “process of cittas”. Bhavañga is the resting state of consciousness which occurs uninterruptedly in dreamless sleep, and which is momentarily reverted to in waking consciousness between each act of processing a sense-object. In interpreting M.I.190 (p.119), Boisvert criticises any idea of a “‘mind’ which applies the ‘act of attention’” to an object when it is known. Yet bhavañga is such a concept of a mind-ready-to-act (though it is replaced by the more active cittas which follow it in the “process of cittas”). M.I.190 describes how viññâna and its accompaniments arise when there is an intact sense organ, a relevant sense-object within range, and an “appropriate samannâhâra”. Boisvert renders the latter phrase as “with these brought together” (p.119), rather than Jayatilleke’s “appropriate act of attention”. Jayatilleke is correct, though, as samannâhâra is a synonym of manasikâra, “attention” (Vibh. 321, M.I.445). Moreover, in the case of hearing, at least, it is clear that an intact ear and an audible sound does not always lead to awareness of sound, if one’s attention is directed elsewhere.

Boisvert goes on to usefully compare viññâna and mano, though he makes no comparison to citta. In the introduction (p.ix), he says that “The tradition emphasizes that ... there can be no consciousness without a body...”, though on p.28 he accepts that in the formless rebirths, “only the four mental aggregates exist”. According to the latter statement, consciousness can sometimes exist without a body.

In the chapter on “Interrelation of the Aggregates”, Boisvert explores the logic of the traditional ordering of the five khandhas, and sees this as mirroring the ordering of nidânas as follows (p.142):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nidâna</th>
<th>Khandha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>viññâna</td>
<td>viññâna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nâma-rûpa</td>
<td>All five khandhas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A key point, here, is his idea that viññāna, as the fifth khandha, completes a circle by going on to condition the first khandha by allowing the arising of sensory contact (phassa). In general, this is acceptable, though one could argue (I do not have space here), that bhava, at least in part, includes the operation of viññāna. One can, in any case, explain the logic of the khandha ordering as follows:

**Conditioning sequence in perceptual process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Khandha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent upon eye and visual form:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arises eye-viññāna;</td>
<td>rūpa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the meeting of the three is phassa;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from phassa arises vedanā;</td>
<td>vedanā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saññā then processes the visual object;</td>
<td>saññā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the saṅkhāras respond to it;</td>
<td>saṅkhāras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mind-viññāna takes in the fully labelled and responded-to object</td>
<td>viññāna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In discussion of these issues, Boisvert sees the nāma-rūpa nidāna as equivalent to all five khandhas (p.129). While this is true for some commentarial passages, it is not true in the Suttas, where rūpa in it is equivalent to the rūpakkhandha, and nāma is “vedanā, saññā, phassa, manasikāra” (S.II.3-4): more or less equivalent to vedanā, saññā and saṅkhāra khandhas. Boisvert discusses the differences in meaning of nāma-rūpa (p.133) but resolves it in an unsatisfactory way: because nāma-rūpa conditions viññāna (in some Sutta passages), it includes it. Yet the same logic would mean that phassa includes vedanā, because it conditions it.

Boisvert is right to see saññā as implied as operating between the vedanā and taṇhā nidānas (pp.136-42), though one can also see (un-wholesome) saññā as equivalent to spiritual ignorance (avijjā), the first of the twelve nidānas. This can be seen from S.732, which says “all
saṅkhāras are calmed from the stopping of saṅnā: i.e. the second nidāna is transcended by the transcending of the first. Boisvert is wrong, though, in saying, without reservation, “actions performed with wisdom as their foundation do not result in saṅkhāra” (p.141, cf. 144). This is for two reasons. Firstly, the action of an unenlightened person may be rooted in non-delusion (wisdom). In such a case, the action would generate goodness-power (puñña), and be a puññabhisaṅkhāra: still a saṅkhāra. In the second case, when a liberated person dies, the saṅkhārakkhandha comes to an end (S.III.112), which implies it still existed for the wisdom-imbued liberated person prior to his or her death. A liberated person still has action-producing volitions—typical saṅkhāras, but not ones which can produce future karmic results. This must surely be because he or she lacks latent tendencies, the root of all karma-producing saṅkhāras.

Boisvert also asserts (p.142) that paṭicca-samuppāda in reverse order—where all the nidānas cease/stop—is “one version of the path leading to the eradication of misery”. This is not quite correct. It is quite clear from S.II.43 that it is itself the end of dukkha, itself what the path leads to.

Within his conclusion, Boisvert says “All the sense-organs except the mental organ (mano) belong to the six sense-doors, while the sense-objects along with the mental organ are included in contact (phassa)” (p.147). Here one can object: a) mano is in fact the sixth of the six sense-doors, b) phassa is part of nāma, and so cannot include physical sense-objects, c) mano is not the same as phassa, though it can condition its arising.

So, overall, The Five Aggregates is a useful study which brings together much material needed for an understanding of the khandhas. In a number of ways it is an improvement on earlier studies, but it is not an exhaustive study, and should be used with reservation, or as a basis of discussion.

Other recent studies—which Boisvert had no chance to consult—are Sue Hamilton’s Identity and Experience: the Constitution of the Human Being According to Early Buddhism (Luzac Oriental, London, early 1996), and my own The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism (Curzon Press, London, October 1995; available from Hawaii Press). The latter is, I believe, soon to be reviewed in this journal.