

THE 5 SKANDHAS AND THE HEART SUTRA

INTRODUCTION

The overall theme for our 2019 programme is 'opening the heart in a suffering world' and within that, in the middle of the year, we're moving to a focus on the Dharma.

The Heart Sutra is a classic Mayayana dharma text in which the Bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokitesvara, who exemplifies the open heart of compassion to a suffering world, looks down upon the world and beholds but five heaps (the 5 skandhas) and sees that in their own nature they are empty.

Seeing emptiness is what gives subtlety and profundity to dharma practice.

Not seeing emptiness, we fall back on something more substantial, more identified, more black and white.

The word 'maha' in Mahayana (the great way) and Maha Karuna (great compassion) means 'from a basis of emptiness'.

Last month, Kulajalini introduced the Tong Len practice, a spiritual rebirth practice in which the drawing in of awareness of suffering with the in breath and the release of healing light with the out breath is just happening. This differs from the samatha form of the karuna bhavana where one personally develops compassion (karuna) within an orientation of self-development. The Tong Len is less self-identified, which is to say more from a basis of seeing emptiness.

THE FIVE SKANDHAS AS ALL EXPERIENCE

Seeing emptiness is a fruition of seeing the nature of experience as it is.

The five skandhas is a way of referring to all experience – just as the six senses and the six elements are.

The Heart Sutra is based on seeing experience as it is, using this model of the five skandhas

Today, we'll be meditating on the five skandhas, just trying to be clear as to what our experience of them is, and whether we can distinguish between them in our experience.

The five skandhas are:

RUPA

The form, shape, or texture of our sense experience.

Not a substantial independent objective material 'thing' being perceived.

We have the idea of a subjective 'self' experiencing an objective 'world'. Sense experience occupies the middle ground between the two. There are no substantial material objects in sense experience. It does seem to have a range from a more 'objective' pole in rupa through the other skandhas described below to a more 'subjective' pole in vijñana.

So we can explore rupa in experience in the following way:

EXERCISE: EXPLOING RUPA IN EXPERIENCE

Bring your centre of attention to the tactile experience of your hands in contact with – lets say the arm of a chair. Notice how you can relate to this either

- as an experience of your hand: the compression of the flesh, and the sensation on the skin
- or as the shape, texture, firmness of the chair arm

Relating to it as the latter, feeling out as far as we can in actual sense experience to the sense of what it is that is experienced. This is rupa

VEDANA

This is the feeling tone – the pleasantness or unpleasantness of sense experience in the physical senses, or the overall tone – happy or sad – of one’s state of mind.

In between pleasant and unpleasant might be neutral in the sense of bland or unnoticeable – or it might be clear, apparent, tangible, even vivid and strong: but neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

SAMJNA

This is interpretation or recognition as well as articulated thought. For example, on returning home, we would recognize our front door as such, but we wouldn’t be explicitly thinking ‘this is my front door’. The basic recognition, whether or not it is accompanied by thought, is samjna.

SAMSKARAS

These are intentions or volitions. The push/pull of wanting/not wanting. Emotions are a combination of vedana and samskara.

VIJNANA

This is consciousness, awareness, the quality of being with, presence, the space around experience, an openness or sensitivity towards experience.

In any moment of experience-in-awareness there will be the felt texture of what is experienced (rupa, vedana, samjna, samskara) along with the sense of how it is to be having that experience: consciousness or awareness of it, a sense of being with it, a sense of presence either embodied or not, a sense of spaciousness around the experience or of constriction within it, a quality of more or less sensitivity towards it. This is vijñana.

EXERCISE: DIRECTING ATTENTION TO EACH SKANDHA IN TURN

As a dialog exercise, you could pair up and in turn, each mention one experience of rupa happening now, then one experience of vedana, one of samjna, one samskara, and one quality of vijñana happening now.

Alternatively, you could do a meditation of five stages, in each stage bringing an open receptive attentiveness to one of the skandas, starting with rupa and working through to vijñana.

DISCRIMINATING BETWEEN THE SKANDHAS

VEDANA AND SAMSKARAS

In relation to ethics, a lot of emphasis is placed on being able to distinguish feeling tone (vedana) from intention (samskara) because intentions are karmically formative, whereas feeling tones are not. Samskaras will be *either* skillful or unskillful. Vedanas are *neither* skillful *nor* unskillful.

What distinguishes samskaras is the pull/push of wanting or not wanting, but this can be subtle.

There’s a gradual shift from pleasant to like or prefer to want to crave to grasp after.

EXERCISE: DISCRIMINATING VEDANA FROM SAMSKARA

In meditation, bring your centre of attention first to the feeling tone of experience.

Notice something in your current experience that has a pleasant feeling tone

Notice if there’s any sense desire for more of this? If so, can you distinguish the pleasantness of the experience (vedana) from the desire for more (samskara)

Notice if you have a preference for pleasant experiences over unpleasant ones: whether you like them more. If so, can you distinguish the pleasantness of the experience (vedana) from the preference for it or the liking of it (samskara)?

VEDANA AND SAMJNA

EXERCISE: DISCRIMINATING VEDANA FROM SAMJNA

Bring your centre of attention to sounds arising. Sounds arise unbidden and generally unpredictably.

Notice which sounds are pleasant (eg bird song) and which unpleasant (eg car horn)

See if you can determine which arises first in response to the sound experience: the recognition of it as bird / car horn (samjna) or the feeling tone of pleasant / unpleasant?

What effect does recognition (samjna) have on the feeling tone (vedana)?

See if you can distinguish between

- the recognition of a sound as something that you like, and as pleasant
- and the feeling tone of the sense experience of the sound.

VEDANA AND VIJNANA

The mind is a sense faculty, just as the five physical senses are sense faculties. The overall state of mind or mood we're in will have its own feeling tone (vedana), which will be happy or sad, uplifted or downcast. The dhyana factor of sukha is a pleasant vedana experienced in the mind sense, just as priti is a pleasant vedana experienced in the physical sense of touch.

EXERCISE: DISTINGUISHING VEDANA FROM VIJNANA

Bring a broad open attention to your overall state of mind, whether uplifted/happy or downcast/sad or neither one nor the other.

See if this feeling tone of your state of mind is something you can be clearly aware of.

If so, notice if you can distinguish between the state of mind (happy/sad) and the mind itself (awareness/presence).