



## The Five Khandhas and An Inventory of Reality with Bhante Pasanna

Recorded on 8/19/23

**Bhante Pasanna 00:07**

I'm happy that we share the same interest, not only in the dhamma in general, but also particularly in this topic: the five Khandha, the five aggregates- as you might be familiar with translating it, and we will together explore the meaning of this very important inventory of our experience. So what are they, these five Khandha? I hope you will bear with me, when I, out of my own habit, leave some of the Pali terms untranslated after explaining them, like the term Khandha, I personally did not yet come up with a perfect one word translation that fits it perfectly. So let's leave it for now. So there are five facets of our experience, or we could call them building blocks of our whole existence. And these five categories of somatic and mental factors encompass any possible experience we humans can have in this world. Each of these khandha has its own function in the whole machinery that we are used to call "our experience." And so each of them have another contribution to make to our experience. As a vipassana topic, it's a bit less popular than let's say, for example, working with the six senses. Mainly, I think, because it takes a little bit more effort to develop these five khandha as objects of awareness. When we work with six senses, immediately everyone knows "this is seeing" "this is hearing", there's not much of an explanation or investigation necessary. But here, it takes a bit of patience and time. But I promise, it's worthwhile the extra effort. Because in this method, this this way of categorizing our experience, via the five khandhas, we discover a thorough inventory of ourselves. And not as a cut off version, as we usually work when we do the six senses, sometimes we're even instructed by meditation teachers to cut off and to, to leave it as at the bare minimum of sense impingement. And so we leave out good parts of what makes the completeness of our experience. And needless to say, that's extremely important for full comprehension of all the aspects of our experience.

**Bhante Pasanna 04:02**

I may also add that developing insight into the five khandhas is a frequently mentioned topic in the suttas. Especially when the Buddha discusses insight, wisdom, liberation- these really fundamental things close to the core of the dhamma. Again, and again, this topic of the five khandhas comes up. So that's another reason why we should be curious and should be interested in understanding, not only understanding the five Khandhas on on a theoretical level, but also maybe find a practical approach of how to make them part of meditation. So to get to know these khandhas better, it's important to get to know their functions and characteristics. So which part of our experience is described by the khandha of sensations of perceptions, for example? To recognize them basically, in our experience, then it's important to see, to learn, to see their causes, in order to see their dependent nature, we understand that there's an underlying cause that causes this phenomenon, this particular Khandha, then, that's an



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

important point to convince ourselves about the unworthiness of getting attached to this particular khandha. So the function characteristics, the cause, underlying it, and also very important, their behavior in real time. And what I mean by that is to witness directly with mindfulness and a clear corporeal comprehension, the impermanent nature their nature of just changing from moment to moment, and the implication of non-self that underlies the impermanence.

## **Bhante Pasanna 06:44**

So I prepared a few sutta passages for you to look at. Because I myself found them extremely useful on my journey to understand, get a better understanding of this khandha topic, and some nice illustrations and metaphors, similes that might make it a bit more accessible or digestible for us. In general I'm a big fan of similes in the suttas. For one, they are efficient tools for our investigation. So they can spark our interest, our curiosity to get a deeper grasp of this or that concept. They are usually historically quite reliable, because as we all know, the Sutta Pitaka is handed down to us over many, many generations and many hundreds and 1000s of years. So we have to assume that this or that word might be it's slightly altered in transmission, but the whole simile that's still makes sense that's still working and intact for us. It's like a time capsule of authenticity. So we can have a good feeling about the originality of the similes. They are easy to remember. And as many of you might be aware, the ability to remember something is a big part of our whole mindfulness practice and a good simile that helps us remember a certain aspect, a certain quality is also very useful to to guide and to protect our direct application when it comes to mindfulness in meditation. I should mention that while the sutta passages we will be working with today stem from the sutta central translations of the Ven. Sujato and I made only minor adjustments to my own references, but the bulk of the work with this translation and the merits accrued should all go to Ven Sujato.

## **Bhante Pasanna 09:55**

So now we'll be reading from the Samyutta Nikaya 22:95 Sutta of the Foam Lump simile. Here we get a whole array of five very interesting metaphors for each of the five khandhas. And we will right away start with the first khandha, with rupa, which I prefer to translate as corporality. More about that later, but let's first hear what the Buddha came up with as a simile here.

## **Bhante Pasanna 10:45**

"Now, Bhikkhus, suppose this Ganga River was carrying along a big lump of foam, and a person with clear eyes would see it and contemplate it, examining it thoroughly, and it would appear to them as completely void, hollow and without essence, for what essence could there be in a lump of form. In the same way, for example, a bhikkhu, (of course, any practitioner can be meant here) A bhikkhu sees and contemplates any kind of corporality at all: past future or present, internal or external, course or fine, inferior or superior, near or far, examining it thoroughly. And it appears to them as completely void, hollow and without essence, for what essence could there be in corporality?"

## **Bhante Pasanna 11:50**

So, we will try to gather a few informations about corporality, mainly from this sutta, but also any bits and pieces of information we can get from the suttas we'll try to put together so we get a good impression of what rupa, what corporality, could possibly mean. So here we here we heard



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

first about the foamy and non-solid nature that's only discernible at keen observation, you've heard about "essencelessness" and gleaned from other suttas like another famous sutta about the khandhas: the full moon sutta, connected discourses Samyutta Nikaya 22:82. We learn about the underlying cause of each of these five khandhas and the underlying cause for corporality are the four elements: earth water, wind, and fire. So corporality is connected to them or caused by those four elements. Now putting all this together, we can conclude that rupa, this corporality equals the experience of having a body.

## **Bhante Pasanna 13:26**

So body as we experience it, is not a solid thing, as we might be used to perceiving it. Especially when we rely on our visual sense, and the perception stemming from our visual sense, we easily might get the impression that the body is a solid thing. When I look at other people's bodies, they appear to me as solid things so I might have the impression that my own body is a solid thing. But, and just as a side note, there are many instances when we contemplate about the body in the dhamma. But here specifically when we talk about Rupa, corporeality, we don't contemplate about the body as a thing. But we rather want to learn something about the body as an experience. So that's why I chose to use this, maybe it's an unfamiliar word; corporeality. I hope it's a word that makes sense to you.

## **Bhante Pasanna 14:54**

So it's not at all this bulky solid thing. But rather, foamy, floating, tingling, streaming, feeling of our body. When we sit in meditation, close our eyes, and we wish to directly experience our body. That's how it feels. So that's the first instance where we can get a nice impression of how the simile the Buddha gives us works. Now, when we sit in meditation, and we try to observe corporality, it might actually really feel quite similar to this instance, the Buddha describes here: a man sitting at the bank of a river. And we can imagine, usually just seeing something floating by. And at first, you might think, "oh, that's something solid, that's some real object floating by", and when we very keenly observe it, you see, "oh, it's just a lump of foam, there's no substance." So like that, when we start in meditation, and I really look forward to try out this khandha meditation with you afterwards.

## **Bhante Pasanna 16:22**

When you concentrate on...basically, it's, the friction of the internal and the external elements. So, our body is made out of the four elements, including our sense organs. And the external world is made out of four elements. And whenever they come together, there arises some friction, some exchange, some interactivity. And that's something we can focus our attention at.

## **Bhante Pasanna 17:08**

The tool to do that is Yoniso Manasikāra which is also alluded to in the text. The best translation for that might be radical attention. My dharma teacher in Sri Lanka, the Venerable Katukurunde Nyanananda, I don't know whether anyone of you might have heard of him; he preferred to translate it as radical attention. Especially because the word radical stems from radix, in Latin, and that means the root, so radical basically means going to the root, or the origin of something. That's what you do here with Yoniso Manasikāra, we penetrate the surface, the facade, so to say of now, in this instance, thinking that I very well know what the body is, and this is the body and this is me, and there's no doubt about it. So we transcend it so to say, we try to look deeper.



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

And in in a real observation in the present moment, we see oh, wow, there's this tingling, streaming, floating feeling, but there's no solid object to be found.

## **Bhante Pasanna 18:40**

So we see there's a difference between the perception of a person with just ordinary awareness and perception of a person with radical or a thorough awareness that really penetrates this layer of illusion. Then let's have a look at the next simile. It's about vedana, which I chose to translate as sensation. Many of you might know it as "feeling" and I purposefully try to avoid the translation "feeling" because it might give us the idea this is about our feelings and emotions, whereas vedana means something slightly different, but we'll come to that.

## **Bhante Pasanna 19:50**

Let's see about this vedana metaphor: "Suppose it was the time of autumn when The rain was falling heavily and a bubble on the water forms and pops right away. A person with clear eyes would see it and contemplate it, examining it carefully. And it would appear to them as completely void, hollow and insubstantial. What substance could there be in a water bubble? So that's that's the picture given for vedana. Which basically means our interpreting sense data as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. And this bubble described here, which seems to form in a puddle that the raindrops fall into, it only appears to be more than water, but basically it's all it's all the same, it's just water. And it's caused by something, by a raindrop just the same way as our sensations are caused again and again by sense contact and share the same impermanent nature with this sense contact.

## **Bhante Pasanna 21:31**

So we should note that I'm collecting these facts from from other suttas now, that vedana is a mental factor. So it's not about the bodily experienced feeling it's about a mental factor, to be more precise part of nama, of conceptuality. And for us, it's possible to observe this to watch this rather than just being sucked into it. So usually, when we experience a sensation- a pleasant sensation or an unpleasant sensation, you might experience it as "today I feel good" or "this particular thing is awful", and then of course, immediately comes liking and disliking. But in our meditation, we try to get to a point where we can observe and understand these sensations rather than feeling they are part of us, or they are expressions of how I really feel right now.

## **Bhante Pasanna 23:04**

So, just as a bubble, vedana is also a fleeting and essenceless phenomenon. One more interesting detail; maybe if you if you ever watch bubbles on a puddle on a rainy day, you might have noticed that it's not only small bubbles forming but sometimes these small bubbles, I don't know due to which physical laws they get attracted to each other and form kind of bubble clusters, and like that we also might experience in our life these vedana clusters or an accumulation of vedanas or a broad variety of different objects or different stories the vedanas are connected to. I hope it makes a little bit sense. We can have a vedana about something right now in this moment, let's say about our seating or the temperature in the room or something like that. Or we might have sensation about how we feel today, or how we feel this week or how in general how this year is going and then past and present ideas and thoughts also start to influence how we feel in this moment. So it is how these bubbles can behave in funny ways. It's not just like, one bubble at a time and all very simplistic to watch, just as a side



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

note to show that, although this practice is very rewarding, by no means is it a simple exercise because we are so used to believe this voice of *vedanā*, this voice of sensation. There's just interpreting sense concept context as pleasant and unpleasant. And we're just so convinced that's how I feel now. And so to get any chance at objectively observing this phenomenon, then that's another little side note, before I continue with the *khandhas*, we always have to get support from *samādhi*.

## **Bhante Pasanna 26:30**

It's very important tool of calming the mind of preparing the mind for insights. And especially in the context of sensations and also of perception, which will be the next *Khandha* we discuss. I'd like to make a small note here. A small rule of thumb that I personally find helpful. When we think about the essence of *Samadhi*, the essence of calm mind or collected mind. It's basically two qualities, its *upekkhā*, and *ekaggatā*. So on the one hand, we have equanimity and one pointedness. And I personally found it interesting that these two have a certain correlation to sensation and perception. Because without sufficient equanimity, it's very hard for us to stay put and stay in the observing mode when it comes to sensations that are pleasant and unpleasant. Because by their sheer pleasantness and unpleasantness, they continuously lure us into reactivity. And *upekkhā* is a wonderful and necessary antidote to keep our distance from this from the sheer suction of these sensations. So if you want to observe and watch sensations, and again, and again, we get the feeling, it doesn't really work because I get so attached and I get so attracted or repelled by these pleasant and unpleasant experiences, we might do well at increasing our ability to observe with equanimity. And the other hand, one pointedness, the other important factor that we gain by practicing *samādhi* is a very important tool to successfully observe perception. Because *Ekaggatā* is the quality that helps us to stay really sharply in the present moment. And, as I mentioned with *vedana* already, it's even more relevant with *Sañña*, with perceptions, that they have this ability to stretch over time. Like, let me give you one example: you might have a perception of a dharma meeting now. So just by this one perception, "this is a dharma meeting now", we open, stretch out the perception over maybe a one or two hours. At the same time, we have micro perceptions from moment to moment. But this spreading out of perceptions often creates the feeling of permanence, because we might well argue, and in a certain way, it would be true to say what this this dhamma meeting might be impermanent at a certain point, but right now it's going on. So it appears to be permanent. That's the reason for permanence, for the feeling of permanence in our life: that we believe these stretched out perceptions. So, one pointedness can be a very useful tool to counteract this stretched-out-ness, if I may call it that, because we really get to see what happens from moment to moment. And that leaves less and less room for disbelief in certain phenomena. Existing unchangingly over time.

## **Bhante Pasanna 30:58**

But that's the big trick of perceptions- that they create these meanings that seemingly last certain periods of time. Coming back to the *khandhas* and to perception already, which is our next *Khandha*: "Suppose in the last month of summer at noon, a shimmering Mirage appears, a person with clear eyes would see it and contemplate it, examining it carefully. And it would appear to them as completely void hollow and insubstantial for what substance could there be in a mirage?" I've said a few things already about perception. So, *sañña*, we translate it as perception. What it really means in my understanding is that this habit of the mind to inject





# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

meaning, in a sense contacts. And that's exactly the meaning of this simile of the Mirage. It creates an illusion, the illusion of permanence, and the illusion of compactness, if you want to call it that. So it's a perception that's similar to sensation. It's also caused by contact, by passa, and it's a mental interpretation of that contact. So let's say there's a sense contact through the sense door of the eye. And this sense contact is then processed by the mind to give it a certain meaning, to give it a certain name, and thereby, objectifying or reifying it. And without proper, radical attention, we might easily get convinced that the meaning our mind just so slyly created is sort of emitted by the object we are watching. So we usually reflect "I just perceive it as a chair or as a clock", But we just get convinced this is a clock, this is a chair, and even even more convincingly, the perceptions about ourselves about our inner life, you'd easily be convinced that Oh, I am a person like this and that without understanding that it's just a mental interpretation into a sense contact. So it's that voice, that mental voice within us that's seemingly recognizing things or naming things and their meaning. And, funny enough, it's a naming of things, at the same time, those things only became things by us naming them. Does that make a little bit of sense to you? So we perceive it to be a thing and then fill it with meaning and memories and whatever we like to perceive it as, and then forget that it was us who started this whole objectification of a sense contact.

## **Bhante Pasanna 35:45**

Alright, pick up a bit of speedier pace, because there's still a lot to talk about. Sankaras: this is the next Khandha we'd like to understand. And here's the Simile, It goes like this: "Suppose there was a person in need of hardwood. Searching, wandering in search of hardwood, they take a sharp ax and enter the forest, there they see a big banana tree standing straight and young and grown free of defects, they would cut it down at the base, cut off the top and unroll the coil sheets, but they wouldn't even find sap wood, much less Heartwood, and a person with clear eyes would see it and contemplate it, examining it carefully. And it would appear to them as completely void, hollow and insubstantial. Of what substance could be in a banana tree?" So, sankhāras I'd like to render as "activity impulses" are also caused by contact. Just a small side note, again, because the word sankhāra appears in different contexts in the suttas. And people might get confused by that. But it's simply a term that does not always mean the same thing. So we also have to think about the context before we attempt a translation of the term and in this khandha context, I find it to be an apt translation, to call these sankhāras activity impulses because that's exactly what they are. They are this mental voice within us that recommends to do this and to do that. Interestingly, it's also caused by contact and not by the meaningfulness of this quests that come into our head.

## **Bhante Pasanna 38:04**

And the simile gives us a nice feel of how unsuccessful and how futile these attempts usually are. Because at least for the, for the mind, still under the influence of ignorance and under this drive of identification, each of these little activity impulses seems like a project to make our permanent self happy in some way or other. And so, since there is no permanent self, in these five khandhas, this is an attempt that only can fail. And like this poor man searching for hardwood and just uncoiling a completely woodless banana trunk. I don't know whether some of you might have seen that such a banana trunk in Asia, or whether they grow in America even, it's really just one foil or sheath after the other and although these are really solid, massive trunks from the outside, there's no wood to find in them at all. So quite a funny picture this



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

person trying to find a hard wood to construct something meaningful in his world and just is left with this completely useless banana pieces banana trunk pieces...but, however fruitless our attempts to follow this activity impulses might be there's always an next waiting in line for us to pick up and to take serious again. And also here with proper preparation and concentration of the mind, maybe rather uncomplicated or something many meditators are anyways used to, because this activity impulses have a lot in common with our random thought constructs, thought stories about what we're going to do tomorrow and what we're going to buy when we go shopping after the meditation and this and that, that's a lot to do with this activity impulses, so we might already be used to this, to this mental challenge of not falling into the narrative of such a sankhāra. But rather stepping out and just observing it and then getting to learn important things about it, stepping out is always very important to getting in the position of the witness, rather than the victim or the person emotionally involved in the whole thing.

## **Bhante Pasanna 41:19**

And then, last, but not least, we have viññāna, which you all might be familiar to translating as consciousness. And I personally sometimes prefer to translate it very unromantically as sense experience, because in my experience, my own meditative experience, but also with other meditators, I have the honor to guide sometimes, this term consciousness usually inspires some kind of mysterious awe in us, whereas in the world of the Buddha, there's no place for any glorification of this term. It's simply the very fact that experience happens again, and again, are caused by impingement of sense data on our sense organs. It's a very interesting metaphor we find here about Viññāna: "Suppose a magician, or the apprentice was to perform a magic trick at the crossroads, and a person with clear eyes would see it and contemplate it, examining it carefully. And it would appear to them as completely void, hollow and insubstantial, what substance could there be in a magic trick?" This magic trick gave me a lot to think back in my forest hermitage in Sri Lanka, and I came up with an interesting explanation that works for me in my own meditation, and I'd like to share with you now.

## **Bhante Pasanna 43:32**

Now as I mentioned, viññāna is again and again, caused by sense organs and sense stimuli, so that's, that's the easiest way to access what consciousness means. There's actually not the term consciousness itself. It's always eye consciousness, ear consciousness nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness or mind consciousness. And the illusory nature of it is that it appears to be one compact consciousness. So at this point, I'm not sure whether my knowledge of the English language will suffice, but there's a difference between the same and the very same. Is that is that understandable? Now, two people can have the same T-shirt, meaning they both they both have a similar t shirt. But the very same T-shirt is only this one unique piece. And just as this is confusing in our day to day language, it's also confusing concerning consciousness, because each consciousness which separately arises and passes away, always feels the same to us. It feels like that's me being aware of something. So, by not very carefully observing this phenomenon, we easily come to the ill informed conclusion that it's the very same consciousness all the time. It's not only the same phenomenon of consciousness arising again and again, it's the very same consciousness that's not changing, that's not impermanent. And that's sort of the core of my experience. That's the magic trick of consciousness. Like in many, many magic tricks work with this- the same versus the very same misunderstanding, like let's say a magician has two handkerchiefs looking exactly



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

the same and is prepared to put one in his sleeve here. And then he produces a magic effect that we all think he puts the very same handkerchief here, and then it appears somewhere else. And at the same time, it was just it was not one and the same handkerchief- they were two similar handkerchiefs, and like that, there's similar consciousness arising and passing away again and again. And to be really precise, this is a teamwork- sort of, of consciousness and perception because the repetition of the same perception creates here this magic of seemingly having a permanent consciousness, just the perception we have about consciousness itself, which is usually "Ah, this is me, this is my consciousness. This is me cognizing." And this gives a wonderful camouflage to the impermanent, arising and passing away of consciousness in the background.

## **Bhante Pasanna 47:26**

So to make it maybe a little bit more approachable, a few illustrations or modes of explanation about these Khandhas there's one I think it originally comes from Venerable Viññāṇa Viada, old monk long passed away who lived in Sri Lanka, they had this mode of explaining the five khandhas in one sentence and I found it's usually helpful for understanding. I slightly modified it for my purposes. So let's say I'm sitting somewhere under a nice pleasant shady tree on a hot summer day. So if someone asked me, "Now please describe your experience to me." My answer would sound like something like: there's a cool pleasant shady tree for sitting under, felt by me. And in this sentence, we have progression through all these five khandhas. The fact that it feels cool, that's part of corporeality. The four elements are connected in a way that there's coolness, pleasant is the sensation part, shady tree is the perception part, for sitting under, would be the activity impulse, and felt by me is consciousness- in this instance body consciousness. So we have a cool pleasant shady tree for sitting under, felt by me. A nice illustration how this these five khandhas are interrelated all the time, woven into this structure we call our moment to moment experience. Well, and I'd have much more prepared but I see time is passing way too quickly. I have to skip a few things.

## **Bhante Pasanna 49:54**

And at the end, just bring it down to a practical approach how to work with this information and there's another very interesting sutta, the Anicca Saññā Sutta, link discourses 22:102. And here we get a very practical instruction in how to meditate on these five khandhas. So, we may experience the benefits of elimination of our sensual desires, elimination of our desire for corporeality, elimination of all desire for being, the elimination of ignorance and eradication of all conceit "I am". That's the preamble here. Then the Buddha gives a few nice similes, highlighting that insight into these five khandhas is a universal key to freeing our mind from suffering. Regardless of the specific details we usually put into our suffering and make such long stories about why I'm suffering because people are not nice to me and life is not fair and this and that. And it has 1000 different faces but we can reduce it to a unskilled handling of these five khandhas, a handling of the five khandhas that's not in line with reality. And bringing our mind back to reality by practicing vipassana, practicing Anicca Saññā, the perception of impermanence regarding the five khandhas, we can bring our mind to a place where we have, so to say, a universal key to any episode of suffering that might occur in our life. And these similes give a nice sense of this all encompassing universal freedom from suffering.

## **Bhante Pasanna 52:45**





# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Because it's like one of my favorites here with the bunch of mangoes, when the stock of a bunch of mangoes is cut, all the mangoes attached to the stock will follow along, so we don't have to pluck each mango separately, if we cut it at the stem iy, at the stock of it, then all the mangoes come along with it. So, like in the same way if we cut suffering at its root, at the ignorance we have about these five khandhas, then all the different manifestations of this suffering in this life situation is not pleasant and that life situation is suffering to me, all these dukkha mangoes they all follow along with it. And how is this perception of impermanence developed and cultivated so that we may reap these benefits? We are introduced to a three step method: Such is corporality, Such is the arising of corporality and Such is the disappearing of corporality.

## **Bhante Pasanna** 53:59

And the same for the other four khandhas, you always have this three step plan of firstly (and most of my explanations now aimed at that) identifying the sense of recognizing in our own experience, the particular khandha: understand, "Ah, this is not just some fancy theory, I can learn by heart- this rupa khandha or this vedana khandha, this means something, this addresses something in my direct personal experience. And we develop the skill to really transplant the theory into our own personal space, so to say. By realizing "Ah, now, when there's a tingling sensation on my sense organs, that's corporeality." And when the mind weighs in and says "Oh, this is unpleasant, and oh this is pleasant. That's sensation!" So that's the first step to clear the field, to get our target in focus, so to speak. And once we have our target in focus, we can start to observe its behavior. And we might realize that this corporality, for example, is a process of continuous arising and arising and arising, whether we wish for it or not, it arises anyways, because the cause for its arising is not us wishing it to arise, the cause for it arising is sense contact. And that by itself, just seeing how we get overwhelmed and attacked by corporality, and sensation and the other khandhas, that alone can give us enough reason to get disenchanted with these five khandhas, to get the ammunition for the mind, so to say, to turn away our interest from getting involved in these khandhas in our search for some permanent happiness, which we might then claim to be us and ourselves. Right, so that was just a very quick explanation of the practice, recognizing it, starting to watch its behavior, part one of behavior- it's continuous arising, which may include our understanding of the causes that are necessary for it to arise, which I mentioned already: for corporality- the four elements, for perception- sensation, activity impulses- it's always sends contact, and for consciousness, to make it a bit more easily approachable, the working of the senses. The other side of the coin, so to say, of watching the behavior of these khandhas, is witnessing not their continuous arising, but them continuously vanishing and disappearing. So each tiny episode of corporality of sensation is in a continuous process of vanishing out of our hands of being being dragged out of our focus of experience. And that's something with a little effort, with a little patience, we can start to directly witness and observe in our meditation.

## **Bhante Pasanna** 57:56

And that's the plan for us to try and do that after a short break. So I hope there were some interesting bits and pieces. I'm very sorry now that I could not finish all my prepared dhamma bits and pieces, because there's so much more to say about this topic. But I've made suffice as a first introduction into this practice, maybe an inspiration to get hold of this approach to vipassana. And I think we plan to make a five minutes break. And after that five minutes, we will



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

together attempt to make a guided meditation on these five khandhas, and after that, we'll have the opportunity to discuss anything concerning this topic. All right, then, thanks a lot for your attention. And I will see you for our meditation in about five minutes.

## **Bhante Pasanna** 59:30

so we'll meditate about half an hour and simply due to time limitations, it will be a rather quick transition from one khandha to the next. But nevertheless, maybe you get the first impression of this technique, which of course you can time more carefully at home many of my students and co-meditators they practice daily one of those five khandhas or even weekly to get a real deep sense of where to find those khandhas and get a good impression of their impermanent behavior so as to eradicate all this identification you suffering. But for now we'll do them one after the other to get to give you a first glimpse.

## **Bhante Pasanna** 1:00:49

For starters please bring your attention in breathing and out breathing of the body, allowing your attention to settle quite naturally in the present moment in the body. Remember in samādhi the mind is there to create equanimity, one-pointedness, a readiness to observe, to learn, comprehend. Each mindfully experienced breath let create a frame of awareness around our body. This framework of presence we use to observe ourselves. Take an inventory of our experience starting with corporality, friction- the four elements displays itself tingling and streaming, the bodily experience. We may try to adjust focus point of our awareness till we have the feeling, "Well this is corporality. It's corporality that I'm looking at right now. Observe the behavior of this corporality, continuous arising, and again arising out of sheer presence of the elements whether we like it or not. The arising of corporality. Watching the same phenomenon just from a slightly different angle- witness the continuous vanishing disappearance of corporality- little tingle, elemental friction lost from us moment to moment is the vanishing of corporality.

## **Bhante Pasanna** 1:12:31

Switch to another part of experience: sensation is pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Feeling is very personal, very important part of our experience. Try, with all the equanimity we may muster, to observe sensation. Recognizing, "Ah, this is sensation." Witness arising sensation bubble by bubble, it just continues to stream in, whether we wish for it or not. Arising of sensation. At the same time none of them can stay pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Sensation is removed from us moment by moment... the vanishing of sensation. Next try to find the thing maker, name giver in our mind: sañña- perception, that which bestows meaning to every sense contact. This is perception. We find a point of focus that we can really see for ourselves: "This is perception." Try to witness the arising of perception. There's no way we can influence or avoid the arising of perception it's caused by mere presence of sense contacts. Its involuntary in as itself, an indicator against the self nature of perception, it's just the arising perception. Each of these sense perception mirages has to vanish again- small ones concerning the direct present, maybe you catch a few bigger ones and concerning perceptions about you, your situation, the past and future. None of those can stay, become part of a permanent self. Try to comprehend what this means, this vanishing of perception? Strongly connected sensations and perceptions, activity impulses, the agenda of the mind rearranges itself from moment to moment always finding something to do. The perceived and sensed so called objects. The gentle voice that gives us



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

things to do, this is activity impulse. Try not to believe in them, to obey them, simply observe them. Soft and continuous unasked for arising of activity impulses. Same time release activity impulses, vanish again and again. We don't buy into the urgency of the agendas, they just slip by, vanish. Finally consciousness arising and passing away. Try to follow the prioritized sense consciousness: ear consciousness to body consciousness to mind consciousness back to body consciousness- jumping from one place to the next. Funnily enough, we can observe and watch this. This is consciousness. Arising of consciousness, too is involuntary, can't stop it or push it away because its causes are not within our will, our wishing. Exposed to continuous arising of consciousness. We can challenge that perception that consciousness is ourselves by pointing the focus of our awareness not on the surface, on the facade of this self-like feeling delving deeper to the continuous vanishing- one consciousness after the other.

## **Bhante Pasanna** 1:36:36

Then we rest for a few moments. Try to absorb whatever we learned in this meditation. Try to understand what this really means. It means insight to the impermanence of all facets of our experience. It could mean our painful struggle or permanent self can peacefully be relinquished if we except the true nature of this inventory of our experience.

## **Bhante Pasanna** 1:39:09

Thanks for joining me in meditation, sorry for the speed run, but I hope you've got a first glimpse of what it can mean to practice the insight with the five khandhas. And now, there would be some time left for a discussion or any questions or comments from your side. I'm happy to answer or comment.

## **Questioner** 1:39:42

Hey, thank you very much. Bhante, I wanted to ask you, this being my first time that I do this meditation. I find that is, in a sense much easier to penetrate the illusion of sensation, particularly physical sensations, and of activity of impulses, then the appearance, the visual appearance of things, because, you know, if I see my hand or my foot, it looks very solid and continuous. And it feels a little artificial to tell myself. "Well, it's just a visual illusion, you know, like a film, it goes very fast, and it looks continuous. So I don't know, how do you work with the visual form?

## **Bhante Pasanna** 1:40:40

Well, I think that's a very common thing, because as humans, we are simply so visually inclined. And one very simple thing most of us do when we meditate is we close our eyes to get a little advance on this problem. And then I'll just recommend to get used to doing it where it is the easiest, and then start to work in areas where it feels not so obvious. Okay. Thank you.

## **Questioner** 1:41:29

Hi Bhante, thank you for your teaching today. I was wondering if you could say a little bit about one of the first passages that you read that discussed there not being any essence to ourselves and our experience, I wonder if you could say a little bit about the relation between essence and nature? If there is any connection?

## **Bhante Pasanna** 1:41:56



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

I don't fully get the question, between essence and nature because those are all nature similes?

**Questioner** 1:42:06

I guess I was thinking more in the sense that like, we're looking at things as not having an essence. But can we look at things as having a nature? Like, do we have a nature that's separate from an essence, if that makes sense?

**Bhante Pasanna** 1:42:22

Well, the essence-less-ness is the nature of things I would reply. I might note that interestingly, in the Theravāda suttas, the term of essence-less-ness is not very often mentioned. Now, the sutta we discussed today, is one place where it is mentioned, but usually the Buddha prefers the term anattā- nonself. Because I think it gives us a clearer implication of what the Buddha is wanting to convey, when we when we talk about the essence-less-ness immediately, as you ask, rightly, the question arises, well, what is meant by Essence, so, we have to understand the Buddha here as just paraphrasing, using another term for nonself here, when he talks about essence-less, but the nature of things, is a bit difficult to think of, especially when we start to realize that the thing-ness of things is itself, construed by our mind. So we can talk about certain behaviors, all of our experiences display- those are the three lakhanas, the characteristics of everything we experience and so there maybe you find an equivalent to the term "the nature of things", rather being concerned about how they behave in terms of how they behave through time, rather than trying to find a certain nature or quality they inherently possess. If that makes sense? It makes sense to you?

**Questioner** 1:44:54

That does. Thank you. That's helpful.

**Questioner** 1:45:02

Thank you, Bhante. Um, I had a question about, like, during the meditation, it felt pretty intuitive to see the arising and passing away of some of the khandhas but not others. So sañña in particular, and the sankhāras also felt- because you had talked about how they sort of stretch in time. It felt difficult to see the passing, like it just felt like they came and then stayed. Yeah. Like the, you know, the sort of more ephemeral impermanent nature was more obvious with the other khandhas and suggestions about how to see the passing away particularly?

**Bhante Pasanna** 1:45:54

Yeah, especially with sañña, as I mentioned in the talk, that's this kind of permanency creating machine. Because when we are into enticed by sañña, we tend to focus on the attributes we project on a certain object. And that does not necessarily change in the sense that we perceive another quality in the object, right. So as I mentioned, a crucial tool of tackling this stubborn sañña is a strongly focused mind that really can keep its focus very straight at the narrow point in the present moment, and then we can, we can let those sañña clouds, the sañña brackets- I like to think of it as brackets, like in a sentence, when you put something in brackets, then we can see how there still is a transition, or a movement taking place. Even while this bracket is intact, right. Another another trick, to break it down, might be to watch out for smaller saññas that together built this bigger sañña. Like for example, if I have the perception, this is our dhamma meeting now, this is a quite widely stretched sañña bracket. But I could pay more



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

attention to the smaller ones, like this is my smartphone device that I use for this session, or this is my meditation block here. And these are the different people I see on my screen. And so I break it up into smaller bits that are not so intriguing. And another thing you might notice is that a sañña is all the harder to tackle the more intense the vedanā is that accompanies it, that if we have a perception that accompanied by a strong, pleasant or unpleasant sensation, automatically, it gets more weight in our mind, and automatically we are made more afraid of it, if it's an unpleasant sensation or more interested in it if it's a pleasant one, and then we again we are disabled to see the impermanence behind the facade.

**Questioner** 1:49:08

That was very helpful. Thank you so much Bhante.

**Bhante Pasanna** 1:49:15

Thank you for the question.

**Questioner** 1:49:16

Okay, thank you. I heard you say that sankhāras mean different things in different contexts. Yes. And I was wondering if you could give an example of a different meaning outside of the of the khandhas. What you mean by that?

**Bhante Pasanna** 1:49:45

Yeah, there's so many different usages for this word sankhāra. That's in general I think an important way of dealing with these Pāli terms. I don't know who came up with idea that we have to find one consistent rendering for a word that's used so differently. We have the problem not only with sankhāra, by the way, also another very big (which was, by the way on my, on my preparation a list, but it didn't make it into the talk) The term dukkha is also one of those terms that is simply used for different purposes. And if we confuse those different usages, we end up in quite a confusion. So with sankhāra, here we have sankhāra as one of the five khandhas, and it has to be noted that there's a possibility of khandhas plus clinging and identification causing suffering. But there's also a set of five khandhas without identification, without ignorance- let's just think about the Buddha or, or his enlightened disciples, they also still have a working set of these five khandhas, but they no longer cause suffering. So that means here already, we can see that sankhāra has to be in this context in the khandha context, a term that can be used neutrally, in a neutral way for awakened people. Because they also have sankhāras onboard still. So that already shows us that this sankhāra here must be a different sankhāra. Like, for example, the sankhāra we find in the paticca-samuppāda list in the dependent coarising where we find the expression that sankhāra are directly produced or caused by ignorance. They can't be the same sankhāra. And even the Buddha, when he saw his alms bowl, he got the sankhāra of "Maybe I should go on alms round." But there was certainly no ignorance involved. So here we have to distinguish already. Another familiar occurrence of the term sankhāra is in the 16 steps of breathing, mindfulness of breathing. And there again are for me in my practice, it's useful to to reconsider what it means in this context, when we breathe in and out in order to calm the bodily sankhara. Right. So that also again, shouldn't mean that arahants can't do breathing meditation because they have no sankaras left to calm. It also might mean a little bit, some has a different nuance than the sankhāra we got to know here in the in the context of the khandhas.





# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

**Questioner** 1:53:23

Okay, thank you. That's very interesting.

**Bhante Pasanna** 1:53:27

Yeah, if you're interested in this topic, please start an investigation in the different meanings of the term dukkha. You'll be surprised, how entangled our understanding of the dhamma can get if we confuse those different dukkha interpretations.

**Bhante Pasanna** 1:53:49

Okay. Thank you. I got a message in the chat from Vidana. He wanted to ask "Can Bhante talk more about Rupa Kanda in relation with vedana? So often our feelings show on our bodies like feeling goosebumps when scared. How can you see the gap that comes in between the two that can help us see them as two different khandhas and not just one single entity?"

**Bhante Pasanna** 1:54:22

Oh, that's a good question. And a lot of this unclear borders between the two comes from the use of our etymology. So whether we say sensation or feeling, none of our usual common usage words really hits the meaning of vedana. Now me not being a native English speaker, I tried to avoid feeling on purpose and came up with sensation as an alternative. Because the big difference between rupa and vedana is that the one, namely, ru[ā], in belongs to the material side. So it's connected with the four elements, and what the four elements contribute to our experience. Whereas vedāna is strictly a mental factor. It's listed under nāma-rupā. The Venrable Sariputta explains the nama factors of the nāma-rupā. Vedāna is one of those. So here it in the context of nama versus rupa, it's clearly not on the rupa side, it's clearly not part of the material aspect of experience, but a mental one. So whether we say feeling or sensation, it doesn't really hit it. Because in my understanding vedanā is that very part of our experience, that just attributes a pleasant, unpleasant or neutrality, to every contact. So if we have goose bumps, in certain situations, we might feel the feeling being pleasant having goosebumps, and in other situations, we might view it as unpleasant, it's just how the storage of our conditionings view the certain sense contact and attribute an according vedana to it.

**Questioner** 1:57:01

So Bhante, that was my question. So can I ask the following question. So during samādhi, when you're in the deep absorption, then you feel some goose bumps, and your body's like, you know, feathers touching. So is it just to be ignored? Because it's a pleasant sensation, not to be feeling good about it, just to ignore and keep moving forward?

**Bhante Pasanna** 1:57:34

Well, in an instance, where we practice insight meditation, that would be the way to go. But on the other hand, if you practice tranquility, and pleasant, peaceful states, sometimes we use those experiences to develop the calm of the mind.

1:57:59

Yes, because you get stuck at that. If you get stuck for a long time and the same, that means that you're doing something not right, so you need to go into Insight afterwards. Right?



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

**Bhante Pasanna** 1:58:12

Yeah, yeah, I mean, Insight is the is the key. And we can prepare a huge golden key, but never use it to open our prison doors. And that will not be very helpful. Right. So as little samādhi as necessary and as much insight as possible. That's maybe that's my basic meditation outlook. But again, we could talk for a long time about what right Samma-Samadhi is, because to me personally, I view it to be much more important that our Samadhi experiences are incorporated into a holistic development of the mind thoughts, letting go and chasing more and more intense happiness experiences because by themselves, they are not really helping us getting to the aim that Buddha wanted us to attain.

**Questioner** 1:59:30

Exactly, thank you so much.

**Questioner** 1:59:36

I have a question about consciousness. I have two places here. Could you please explain about what you said? That there is no consciousness that is not linked to one of the khandhas, that's what I understand at least by what you said. So there is no consciousness separated by itself. And my question, it's because when you get to Jhana, for instance, there is no body at a certain point there is no body there is just consciousness just, you know, just pure...

**Bhante Pasanna** 2:00:45

I would disagree to be honest. oh. I mean pure consciousness is not something the Buddha will talk about. Consciousness is always dependently arisen maybe it got lost a bit in my explanation- dependently arisen on the six sense bases, that's what I was talking about today in this dhamma talk. And there's no difference between the samādhi and not samādhi because the body does not vanish, I mean, that's obvious, otherwise your meditation cushion would become empty if someone passes by so your body is there, alright, you might not experience it in the way you used to experience it, right? Meaning the focus of your attention is somewhere else. And so most probably if you talk about the experience of some special kind of consciousness, that would mean that the focus of your attention is resting on a certain perception, the perception of pure consciousness, for example. But the mind consciousness holding this perception is still connected to the body. Because the mind is also connected to the body. Mind itself is nothing else but the software of our thinking organ. So that's at least I understand it. Right?

**Questioner** 2:02:27

Yeah, no, that makes sense. Now, yeah. So the only things that we don't perceive the body, we don't have the sensation of the body. Of course, the consciousness is attached to the body. But since then the consciousness would be attached to would be linked, in this case, to the Rupa?

**Bhante Pasanna** 2:02:54

Well, I wouldn't say that consciousness is directly linked to rupa. Consciousness is always interrelated with the other four khandhas. If we want to now leave, talking about the connectedness between consciousness and the sense bases and want to go into the interrelatedness between consciousness and the other khandhas. There's also an



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

interrelatedness, because consciousness per definition, is being aware of something, being conscious of something, so we can't possibly imagine, to be conscious without being conscious of something that would mean to be unconscious, completely. Right. But there's one, there's one particular exception, it's not about a samādhi mind, which, as we, I think, clarified there's a consciousness in samādhi can find a very subtle, and for the compared to our usual ways to go through the world and experience the world- unusual perceptions, right? But our aim as meditators is rather to get consciousness loose its interest in taking up and grasping the other khandhas. That doesn't mean that this consciousness is then not caught caused by our sense bases or still interrelated with the other khandhas, but what we try to attain is a non grasping mind, right? And for my own purposes, in my own practice, I came up with a different rendering to this term grasping, because grasping always suggests that there is someone or something that does the grasping so when I talk about the grasping of the five khandhas we easily imagine like a mysterious entity grasping the five khandhas and then again, we end up with some sort of mysterious unexplainable entity. So I prefer to call it a being a glued or a sticking together off the five khandhas. So the grasping all happens within the context of the five khandhas: they intertwine. So, like we discussed earlier about the difficulty of working with the impermanence of perceptions, and I said, it's because sometimes it's so strongly attached to a certain vedana. That's exactly what I mean, for the unawoken mind, these khandhas are so intrinsically interwoven, they seem all to justify each other. And so they build a structure. And what we try to achieve is by understanding, we can't ever really separate them. But we can make our focus rest on one of those. Right, like, if you have, let's say, you have a room with five lively children, you can't really separate them and say you stay here and you stay there, they jump all over the place. But still, you could focus on one of them, maybe you know, this child is sick and needs a little extra care so you could focus on that one child, even while they're jumping around. And at the same time, in the same way, we try to understand from each khandha how it really is, it's impermanent, it's conditionally arisen and therefore it loses its stickiness, that it usually would contribute to a nice compact, a feeling of a solid self. Right. So what you try to achieve is not a higher form of consciousness. That's nothing to do with the other khandhas anymore. But a state where consciousness and the other khandhas are no longer driven into each other by this force of of desire, which makes us long for some stability and some self.

## **Questioner** 2:07:57

Thank you, it was a very confused no understanding. Because, you know, reading about there's consciousness and there is all the other khandhas. And were there. So now it's, I understand what you mean. It's very clear. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you

## **Bhante Pasanna** 2:08:39

I got something from Prinana. Could you please request Bhante to talk more about exploring arising and passing away of consciousness specifically, and how it is different compared to the other khandhas?

## **Bhante Pasanna** 2:09:12

So, yeah, that's an interesting question. Basically, it's not different at all. But it needs a little bit more of finesse from our side. Because consciousness is so much the carrier of our self illusion. Right? So I mentioned a little bit already in the talk, that there's a strong connection, especially in this regards, between consciousness and perception. Because we have a



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

perception about consciousness and the perception we have about consciousness is that it is the core of our self, this kind of the awareness that always stays put whatever we do in our life, and that that's the thing we have to crack open. And so I would recommend anyone (and basically anyone should) anyone who's now specifically interested in comprehending the impermanence of consciousness, steel your mind, in training, knowledge about insight into perception, because that's the key there, we have to, we have to understand the layer of perception that's clouding the impermanence of consciousness. And we can also do some small tricks or experiments on binding intentionally binding consciousness to a certain perception. I used to use the breathing for that, you can develop your own little method out of it. You could try to focus on now mainly body consciousness while you breathe in. And at this time, you're allowed to really fully absorb the, how it feels to identify with this body consciousness that's connected to breathing in, which would usually feel like now I am the one who is breathing in, I'm the one who feels this in-breath. Right? I'll try to internalize this feeling of I am the in-breather. And then when we breathe out, we don't do the same again. But we rather observe that this one particular consciousness of "I am the one who experiences the in-breath" is no longer present when we breathe out. If that's too close, we can go further back into the past, maybe, let's say, we could try to remember the consciousness we had when we started this dhamma meeting. How did it feel? Can we maybe something else happened today, which left an impression in your mind and try to remember how it felt to have that particular sense consciousness at that point of time. And where is it now? So we can see individual consciousness arises and passes away. But the fact that consciousness is part of our experience, that's a constant, so we don't have to fight that and, and try to have a moment of being unconscious to prove that consciousness is impermanent, consciousness is impermanent, and at the same time, it's permanently part of the whole set of experience. So we have to we have to aim at the right impermanence to crack it. Does that make any sense?

**Questioner** Yes, it does. Thank you so much, Bhante. Thank you.

**Bhante Pasanna** You're welcome.

**Bhante Pasanna** 2:18:15

Yeah, it sorry, viññanam anidassanam. I got it now

**Questioner** 2:18:24

is experienced as an object of perception? Or does our consciousness become without surface when it loses interest in the khandhas?

**Bhante Pasanna** 2:18:33

Consciousness without surface... I would say it becomes uninterested in any meaning. So if that's meant by surface then alright, but I wouldn't say that. It's really dancing along the edges of language here because in a certain way, you could say that viññanam anidassanam translation, usually it's translated non-manifestative. But that's a bit too, I find this a bit too cheesy, literally it would rather mean non depicting consciousness which is the description for liberated consciousness. And that simply means consciousness that has lost its interest in a playing with the other khandhas, so to say, and thereby also losing its power to create something out of its union with the five khandhas usually when the five candidates get together and grasping is



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

involved, we get a certain product out of this and that's called bhava or being. So this being is not just a neutral term, it's a charged term- charged with ignorance, because being is a state we create by identifying with these khandhas, right? So when I have the feeling "I am someone" and I have certain attributes and this and that, and I use all the khandhas to create a certain image of self. That's when the viññāna is creating a picture. Right, I'm using rupa and vedāna and saññā and sankhāra to paint the picture. So, but once we understood that, within these five khandhas, there's nothing to gain- such a picture is not really of a lasting quality. They simply don't stick together as nicely, and the picture doesn't really appear any longer. So that itself again can involve perception. But at the same time perception is no longer of such a high interest that it creates the new feeling of a "me" in all that. Did that satisfy the question ?

**Bhante Pasanna** 2:22:02

Yes, we hope so.

**Questioner** 2:22:06

I am not sure if she has a response or not. Are you up for one more question? Why don't we take one more question and then we'll wrap it up there. Okay, this is from Kath, could you please ask Bhante, how can one see the impermanence, non-self and unsatisfactory state of an endeavor but needs to pursue it? E.g. searching for a new job, approaching it in a way that diminishes craving and suffering?

**Bhante Pasanna** 2:22:46

Yeah, that's a good question. Basically means how to move in the world with this knowledge, because it's basically a knowledge that finally will lead us out of this world. So we could answer that on different levels, that the most straightforward level would be always prioritize the true nature of things and lead a meditative life. But of course, that's maybe not very helpful if you have to move around move about in our life. So I would suggest that try to incorporate the insight into impermanence and nonself into our worldly endeavors. Now, let's say you're applying for a new job. And so usually people do that with a lot of anticipation and anxiety and hopes, getting up and already imagining how wonderful it would be to have this stable job or whatever. Creating scenarios in the mind which sell them some fake permanency feelings or self indulgences. And so we can we can move about our daily life and the world also more liberatedly if we bring a certain feeling of relaxedness or an uninvolvedness to the table when it comes to such topics. And maybe if the job we apply for is completely contrary to this insight, then maybe it's anyways better we find another job that's more suitable, that maybe even appreciates a person in the workforce who's laid back and not easily excited and who has a solid foundation in a certain self awareness even if that self awareness means insight in oneself.

2:25:26

Alright, so thank you very much for this invitation. Thanks for sharing your dharma space while letting me talk and explain a few of my dharma insights to you was a pleasure sharing them with you. And I wish you all the best on your journey to ultimate liberation. And maybe one day our paths will cross again. And until that moment, I wish you all the best.