

6. Five Skandhas – Emptiness – Interconnectedness

Good morning everybody, also on zoom, and greetings to Vienna and today is a special day, because my wife Kogyo gave her first dhamatalk today, six hours before me.

Welcome to my sixth talk.

Last time I ended with the vijnanas and how the five skandhas get filled with this thing that we call “Me” or “I”.

Buddha analyzed that what we perceive as the creation of a self is a compilation of five aggregates - the skandhas and he said:

"When these five aggregates are there, there is a person, when these disappear there is no longer that person".

Literally translated, the words Skandha in Sanskrit and khandha in Pali have 5 meanings : 1. bulk; 2. the trunk of the body or of a tree; 3. mass; 4. a section or chapter; 5. sensorial aggregates which condition the appearance of life in any form.

Now, we define the five skandhas as:

First 1. “Rupa – form/materiality” – second 2. “Vedana -sensation, feeling –third 3. “Samnja - perception” – fourth 4. “Samskara – mental formations - embodied conditioning or associations, impulses – and fifth 5. “Vijnana – consciousness

And they are an important part of the Abhidharma in Pali Kanon.

In my first sangha, it was taught that the skandhas happen in ascending order from the first, first the form then the sensations and so on up to consciousness, and so one gives rise to the other, which is also true in a certain way. On the one hand this is very logical and sounds very good at the first moment, but I think there is also a contradiction with principles of our teaching, when everything is empty in principle and there is nothing before the phenomena arises, everything exists simultaneously and co-arises and when everything is impermanent, there can be no order and so this is the other side of the Skandhas. It is difficult for our logical thinking to imagine that everything happens at the same time and is there all at once and it only depends on where we direct our attention in this moment.

Dwelling in ambiguity this is what we learn from our practice, from sitting in this upright posture. Ambiguity comes from the Latin word *ambiguitas* which means “double meaning” or “many meanings”. But we humans love unambiguity, we want something we can rely on, something that gives us stability, something that we can believe in.

Living in the paradox, not one, not two, means to live between the two truths, the relative and the absolute. It is the attempt to understand the paradox of life, to understand the opposites is

the basis of our Bodhisattva vows, not the uniformity of the world, which we would like so much.

The term "paradox" - comes from the Greek word "para", and means "beyond" and from "dokein", which means "to think", so paradox means: beyond thinking.

So, today in my talk, I start top down with the fifth Skandha, the consciousness and then there is no chronological way down, we jump to the third, the perception and afterwards to the first, the form and then later we come to the fourth and second. I know this might be a bit confusing, but I do it because the second and fourth skandha are very important and like it said before, in a way there is no order.

Let's start now from the back of the list of skandhas with the consciousness. I have already talked about consciousness in great detail, and one could think that the Vijnanas are the explanation of how the Skandha consciousness arises. That would again be a very nice simple explanation and reminds me of my time when I worked in chemistry and the explanation how atoms are built, but once more it is the space in between that is important. And the Vijnanas are part of mostly every Skandha, as I understand it.

But first I have to make a little side trip, I have talked so much about consciousness and I can't avoid to talk again about the scientific approach to consciousness, because this topic will become very important for everybody in the next years, just now when AI becomes so important.

A Dharma friend of mine who is a university professor of programming, philosophy of science and mechatronics, has worked for years in the field of prosthesis design and the connection of nerves with machines.

He has talked a lot to Chatgpt and is fascinated. I am not an enemy of Chatgpt in principle. This program is perfectly justified, because no human can read all that AI has already read and that will bring many advantages. And that can help us a lot in various areas and I really think that this is true. But I think we have to be very careful here and take our time and above all we have to look closely to make sure we make the right distinctions. For example, we should distinguish the knowledge that Chatgpt has from wisdom, even more from the wisdom that we talk about in Zen all the time, or better said, the wisdom we cannot really talk about, the wisdom beyond wisdom.

And can AI or a machine in general have consciousness?

A machine does not breathe, there is no heartbeat and there is no homeostasis, which is the balanced state of physiological body functions; stability of the ratio of blood pressure, body temperature, blood pH, etc., The maintenance of homeostasis is controlled by the autonomic nervous system, so humans cannot willfully influence its regulation directly. In a machine, there is no such kind of interplay and a machine cannot embody its phenomenal experience. It can therefore also not absorb Qi, it is not alive, in a way it is simply dead, and so not a sentient being.

And when we talk about consciousness in Buddhism, we are talking about the conditioned consciousness of human beings, which means it is most of the time in delusion and not pure because of the mind poisons and all the karmic circumstances.

But as human beings we have the possibility to see our true nature, because we have Buddhature. This is why we have to practice, and how could AI do this? A robot with thinking beyond thinking, or not thinking.

So can AI or a machine with AI have consciousness, the kind of consciousness that I talked about in the last two lectures?

The former Google boss of AI design said a few month ago that we have to talk about this, because in his research he came across something that he would call consciousness!

In the new theories of consciousness of the neuroscientific approaches, which are based on old ideas, mostly on the fixed idea that everything must be measurable and intrinsic experience is worth nothing as long as intrinsic experience does not result in a deflection on any scale, it is considered only minimally important, and even then, only in the field of psychology.

But for consciousness there is no unit of measurement yet and from my point of view there never will be. At present the whole story depends on the neuronal correlate, which is desperately researched. The neuronal correlate is the measurable brain activity that goes along with the process of consciousness and that is what the research is pouncing on at the moment. Research which, by the way, is largely based on simulations or models.

I would like to tell the story of a creature called the small roundworm "Caenorhabditis elegans" which has a tiny nervous system, it has 302 neurons and about 6000 synapses, in humans there are 100 billion neurons and several 100 trillion synapses. So, in 25 years of research work, it has been possible to capture and depict this neuronal networking system. But until today nobody knows how it works.

It is impossible to say why the worm moves, or why it does not move at all.

And then there is the "No report phenomenon" . This neuronal correlate is dependent on whether someone reports it or not. if the subject reports it during one of these brain activity measurements, the activity is many times greater than if he only experiences it. It's a big puzzle.

And the next question we have to ask is: "Does AI have buddhanature" – What is the answer?

Maybe you know the picture where Japanese priest bow in front of a Avalokithesvara robot that is chanting the heart sutra.

Does a robot have Buddha nature this question was raised again this March by Tricycle magazine and immediately answered with a yes in an article by the Japanese author Mashiro Mori. He has been managing to place this question prominently in the Buddhist community again and again since the 70s and answers it every time with yes because he is subject to a fundamental misunderstanding. Every time he quotes Dogen Zenji from the fascicle Bussho from the Shobogenzo. He quotes a talk by Yuian Iwasawa that everyone has Buddha nature. He

makes the mistake, as many do, of assuming that we have Buddha nature, and this is the great misunderstanding. Buddha nature is not a property, not something fixed like an organ or any other part of the body. We all have the ability to discover our Buddha nature and through this discovery, we realize our true nature, but we do not own it. It is like a gateway that we can open, that we can approach through our practice. We can only be Buddha nature, we cannot have it.

And all the scriptures and the talks and discussions about Buddha nature are always about human beings, because only we have this overflowing mind that is so confused and blinded by our karmic conditioning, so we have to open up to our Buddha nature and we cannot just be it, like most other beings, from sentient beings to mountains and rivers.

And what is artificial intelligence again? It is conditioning par excellence, if you leave out all the conditioning, meaning the algorithms and "deep learning", or dissolve it, just as we human beings transform our deluded minds in our practice, what is left?

So do I need to say anything more? I don't think so.

All this shows me that science and society have gone in a wrong direction and in this scientific discussion, scientists emphasize a model of the human being that works like a machine, an engine, that is determined by laws that are clearly, linearly, stepwise hierarchically structured, like early mathematics or physics. This is a world that is built in three dimensions and linear time.

As I already said, the problem is called "the tyranny of scientism" named so by a German scientist.

So now enough about this issue, let's talk about consciousness in the skandhas. Its creation is very similar to that of the seventh vijñāna, the manas vijñāna, like I explained in the last talk.

The fifth skandha, consciousness, accepts the activities of each of the other skandhas as its objects. It can also recognize its own activities, as asserted by Hsüan-tsang in the Yogācāra that consciousness recognizes itself.

And this is very important, we can recognize or notice it and especially observe how it arises, how it is composed of the individual Skandhas and the other Vijñānas, especially our ego-centered consciousness is important here. This spirit of observation is the awareness that we strengthen and emphasize in zazen and we call it in German "Gewahrsein" – awareness, the roots here in German are the same like with the word "Wahrnehmung" – perception in German, "take the truth"

The difference between the fifth Skandha consciousness and third Skandha perception is that in consciousness, the object rules, and in perception the subject rules.

Perception recognizes the object, it distinguishes without discrimination, but consciousness is already the object, we identify ourselves with it, it has become "mine", it includes the "Manas", the seventh vijñāna, this can be also translated as "mine".

This is a very important distinction, the third skandha only distinguishes, it does not discriminate.

And here we come straight to the third Skandha, perception.

As we have already heard, our egocentricity forms this stream that we believe to be our life. Rene Descartes says already in the 17th century: "I think therefore I am". In the further course of his treatise Descartes shows which understanding he has of nature. He regards living beings, including all animals, basically as machines, even if they are especially cleverly constructed machines. Humans are distinguished from animals because they have reason and language. Descartes calls his treatises on this topic "Meditations on First Philosophy" but meditation here does not mean religious contemplation, as we understand it, but rather thinking.

He talks about perception and that he already believed that many things in his perception were not true. interesting, right?

But he draws the wrong conclusions, for him there is no true nature of things.

And here zazen and awareness of the mind offer a way out, we can dive into our stream of experience and notice how our mind arises, in the sense of mind content, the first six Vijnanas. Like I said before, in German there is the word "Gewahr Werden" which means: "to become conscious of the truth".

We open in our mind another space, a field in which our awareness of the truth can appear - our "I" steps back into the background, we no longer perceive ourselves only as "I", but let our "I" appear and notice what arises.

Like I said last time, there is this possibility of intuitive perception.

In this physical process of letting the "I" in, one can also speak of incubating, we also notice our other sensory consciousnesses, the vijnanas. We recognize how they are assembled and then we can recognize the different levels of how we perceive.

The longer we practice, the more we can learn to focus our attention on specific content and not just be at the mercy of our karmic being anymore. For example, we can direct our attention to our breath and notice the life energy associated with it.

In neuroscience the self, the egocentricity does not play a role, this is a job for psychology and philosophy, as explained before neuroscience sees consciousness as a kind machine, so becoming conscious consists only of brain activity, of neuronal thunderstorms which then spread into many regions of the brain and then become consciousness - that is one of the current theories.

And so we come back to the 3rd skandha, Perception – in Sanskrit "Samjna" which means that something comes into conceptualization - Sam = assembling, merging - jna = knowing = knowing that assembles.

After the first skandha-the form and the second- the sensations that can be pleasant, painful

and neutral, which as we will see is influenced by the fourth skandha – the mental sensations, the third skandha assembles all previous elements. As a result, we perceive.

That which appears is put in relation with other things - if we see something in a foreground, it is put in relation to the background, the space around it is included, the conceptualities are assigned, like colors and sounds.

And then the 10000 things get labels, they are named - the thinking arises – knowledge and associations or formations, the fourth skandha, are put together, not knowing is gone and we are back in the fifth skandha and have performed consciousness content

What arises first when the spark ignites? It is the form - Rūpa—though usually translated as “form” or “matter,” in most Indian thought rūpa denotes a materiality that can be sensed. For me, form is the manifestation of nature.

In early texts Rupa refers to the 4 sensory faculties - soft/hard – liquid/solid - temperature and movement - or better said the four elements - earth - water - fire - air - but not in a materialistic sense as we understand it today -.

but in the sense of how the fabric of the four elements becomes our being.

How the world is composed out of the ten thousand things. The 10000 things are often used as a synonym for emptiness.

In the Abhidharma, also called the pure phenomenology of consciousness, there are six classes and 52 subclasses and as I said before this is too detailed for me. For me it is more important to explore how the spark can ignite and how it becomes a fire and turn into a spreading fire.

But first let’s talk about the second skandha and the second is the sensation or feeling Vedanā in Sanskrit. It contains the three modalities through which we cognize anything, as pleasurable (sukha), as painful (dukkha, S. duḥkha) or as neutral (upekkhā, S. upekṣa).

And I want to quote a study that shows how this second Skandha is influenced by the fourth Skandha, our formations, associations or impulses, there is this wonderful study I want to share with you:

In the British Documentary "The Secret Life of Babies" by Bernhard George, I came across a brilliant example of how our conditioned mind works. In one fascinating series of tests, two babies—one exposed to rock music in the womb, the other to her mother's harp-playing—were found to have a direct correlation in heart-rate patterns to the music they heard in utero. Even after the infants were born, one preferred classical music whereas the other showed positive reactions when rock music was played. When the "wrong" kind of music, the one they were not used to, was played to them, they started crying. The "rock music baby" couldn't stand classical harp music and vice versa!

Crying because of harp music!

So we can see that our mind will always stick to what it is used to and what it has been

conditioned to like. Who doesn't like harp music? Or on the other side, who doesn't like rock music?

<https://videolibrarian.com/reviews/documentary/the-secret-life-of-babies/>

And that's how we get our habits, our patterns, what we like and what we don't like and because we want to avoid pain we avoid things we don't like.

The idea is, or the theory is, that these patterns, are located in the fourth skandha. They are always present in a background mind and influence the second skandha and our perception.

The fourth skandha, mental activity or formations, or associations or impulses, in Sanskrit "Samskara" – is made up of "conditioned things" or "dispositions, mental imprint" or "embodied conditioning" - our karmic latencies, these are the things that are latent and make us act and react in a certain way - karmic in the sense, that past experiences have led to certain behaviors and have become our unconscious behavior patterns - for example we meet someone unknown and we unconsciously immediately have an opinion – something we see reminds us of something, for example a smell. I mentioned in a past talk that smell is a direct way to our darkness. I have a very easy example: our former landlords had a dog called Astra - as soon as he smelled me he started to bark and to be afraid - and we react in exactly the same way - because of our former experiences - painful or pleasant - we divide the world into good and evil - and our delusion becomes reality - the pattern and all its connections emerge and they appear clearly in front of our inner eye – in this moment of realization - we can escape the illusion of our life - escape from the imagination of our life - but the 4th Skandha is the gateway to our life, this Skandha is the gateway to our deep desires, to our cravings and desires.

Rumi says:

"The wound is the place where the Light enters you."

"Trust your wound to a teacher's surgery.
Flies collect on a wound. They cover it,
Those flies of your self-protecting feelings,
Your love for what you think is yours.
Let a teacher wave away the flies
And put a plaster on the wound.

Don't turn your head. Keep looking
At the bandaged place. That's where
The light enters you.
And don't believe for a moment
That you're healing yourself."

I think most of you here know Rumi, he has been described as the "most popular poet"^[15] and the "best selling poet" in the United States, says Wikipedia.

Rumi (30 September 1207 – 17 December 1273), was a 13th-century [Persian](#) poet, and [Sufi mystic](#) he has been popular for many centuries all over the world.

My first direct teacher Ryuten Rosenblum quotes Rumi very often, his wife Jeanne is a senior teacher at the *Ridhwan School*, home of the Diamond Approach to Inner Realization, founded by A.H. Almaas and in this school Rumi is important and Ryuten and his wife went on retreats there every year. This is how Rumi quotes came into my practice.

And again: "Don't turn your head. Keep looking
At the bandaged place. That's where
The light enters you."

This is our practice in zazen, we let everything that comes up arise and let it go, we don't only open our hand of thought, this means we also open our hand of our feelings, of our fears, hatred, anger and our grief, we open our hand of what is called the Kleshas. They are one of the six classes of consciousness in the Abhidharma. And again, the Kleshas are categorized in 6 classes and 20 underclasses. Buddhists really love lists!

Klesha, in Sanskrit, translates to: defilements in pali: kilesa, it is also called "passions clouding the mind".

These are strong emotions, such as aggression, greed, ignorance, jealousy, arrogance, pride and everything that results from them. Nowadays they are also called neurosis, and Shantideva calls them entanglement, entangled emotions. In essence, Kleshas are a dynamic elusive energy, but an energy that easily enslaves us and causes us to speak and act in a less than intellectual manner.

"Greed hatred and delusion are the basic Klesas" - says Edward Conze

It is also said that the kleshas are impurity and the obstacle of purification and this is the main theme in Visuddhimagga text "The path of Purification", an important part of the Abhidharma. There it says at the very beginning, "distinguish the tangle."

We find intimacy in the unknown and follow the threads of our tangle, thus unfolding our own entangled stories, trusting completely in our bodily wisdom, and thus coming into contact with our suffering, not avoiding it, but penetrating it, transforming it, and thus learning to expand our own boundaries. By the way: the word "sutra" is literally translated as: "the thread"

Bodhicitta is the counterpart to the Kleshas, "bodhi" means awakening and "citta" means mind, but more in a universal way. We have to consider that in yogic culture there is no distinction between mind and heart and so when bodhicitta has arisen the whole being is striving towards awakening and when it is awakened then it works all by itself, you don't have to do anything, you only have to nourish it with practice. It nourishes itself from the universal connectedness of everything with everybody.

We can get caught by our emotions so quickly, and I want to bring up a practice instruction from Fukanzazengi in Shobogenzo.

It is said: "Hence, you should stop searching for phrases and chasing after words. Take the backward step and turn the light inward. Your body-mind of itself will drop off and your original face will appear. If you want to attain just this, immediately practice just this."

Like I explained in the third talk, the backward step became an important phrase in my practice and not only in Zazen. just like the term "unhook" from the Mountain and Waters sutra, we need to unhook our emotions, ideas and conceptions. To take all of this from the hook of our self.

In this way we can learn to see the 5 skandhas as empty of our own being, as it says in the Heart Sutra, and see how our consciousness arises.

We shouldn't focus on our wrong idea of consciousness, on what we think our life is, the fifth skandha. Instead we need to focus on the process of how our consciousness arises.

How the first sensations manifest into form? How we anticipate them, whether we experience them to be good, bad or indifferent, dwelling in our body sensing, noticing what arises, putting it together as perception and remaining aware of what we add from our karmic existence.

Thus, we are discovering more and more our own inner emptiness, linked to the emptiness of the things that come at us from outside. We distangle the tangle more and more.

And so, more and more, as we disentangle the threads of relationships to everything, we immerse in this world of permanent connectedness, we dwell in the threads that invisibly connect us in Indra's net, and they become perceptible and we don't get caught anymore - Dongshan Liangjie, the founder of the Caodong Lineage, the forerunner of Sotozen, says in "Song of the Jewel Mirror Samadhi": "You are not it, but it is truth it is you". I interpret Dongshan's phrase for me as, "It is me now, but I'm not it."

Not knowing is nearest it is said in the in Koan 20 of the Shohuroku, one of my favorite koans, my shuso koan.

Dwelling in not knowing, immersing and dwelling in a felt reality we cannot really grasp.

Reliance in the Non reliance.

Like I mentioned in one of my talks: finding trust when we open the bottom of the bucket and let ourselves fall, trusting that there is something that will hold us, the word dharma also has the meaning of that which supports, finding support in this that which arises out of impermanence, - learning to be the melody of the dharma.

In Chinese there is a word for this: "wuwei" a part of the larger concept "tzujan" also called ziran "ziran" which translates to "spontaneous" or "natural".

or a more descriptive translation would be "the event of the appearance", is an attempt to explain the origin, what is born, what is unborn. It is the ontological basis of Daoism, which later became mixed with Chan Buddhism. The diagram of concept of the "five ranks" from Dongshan Liangje is also called "wuwei". To explain this difference between Daoism and Chan Buddhism in

more detail, I would have to open a big new topic, besides, I also lack the more detailed knowledge to really explain it.

Anyway "wuwei" literally means "doing nothing" or "selfless action". WU WEI is sometimes mistranslated as 'non-action'. In fact, it means no calculated action, nothing but spontaneous action, the kind of action we need to meet the demands of the passing moment.

Chunang Tzu, who along with Laotzu is considered the founder of Daoism said:

"The 10000 things can only have "ziran" as their source. It is the selfless action - "wu-wei" that turns "ziran" into "ziran"

and further..... "when you act selflessly "wu-wei" you are confident and act from the source."

This might clear up this misunderstanding of "doing nothing" and "being good for nothing" a little bit, it's just about a "spontaneous, intuitive, natural" way of acting without adding anything.

All four embracing Bodhisattva actions and especially beneficial action result from this understanding that the world is permanently connected to everything and everyone and from the understanding of "WuWei" , which is inherent to us.

And so one equals zero and then equals infinity -> $1=0=\infty$

My view of the world has changed a lot through this practice of closely observing my skandhas and vijnanas. When I talk about cutting my experienced world into thinner and thinner slices, I am talking about cutting my thinking into thinner and thinner slices to find out how it is composed. This has little to do with cutting anything off, because I'm still separated, I am in my dualistic view of the world.

On the contrary, through this concentration on the intuitive perception of the first six vijnanas, as described in the last lecture, and my breathing like I talked in my third talk, a new way of being in connection with the world arises, it is a tangible connection with the things that appear, a felt way of following the appearances of one's realthreads of relationship with the world.

A felt way of being in connection with the world.

Thank you.

Question, comments,