

APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPTUAL PERCEPTION OF THE FIVE AGGREGATES AND ITS IMPORTANCE OF SAÑÑAKHANDHĀ

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Abstract

The five aggregates are one of the most critical concepts in Buddhism. They function as a building block for the teachings of the Buddha. Without them, the instructions collapse. Understanding the five aggregates can help you unlock many Buddhist practices. Sanna is the faculty that recognizes. Most of the thinking fits into the aggregate of Sanna. The word “Sanna” means knowledge that adds together. “It is the capacity to conceptualize and recognize things by dealing with them with other things”. For example, we realize shoes as shoes because we deal with them with our former experience with shoes. When we see something new for the first time, we invariably flip through our mental index cards to find categories we can associate with the object. It is “some kind of tool with a red handle,” for example, adding the new thing in the categories tool and red.” We might deal with an object with its context. For instance, we recognize an apparatus as an exercise machine because we see it at the gym. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to identify the importance of five aggregates in Buddhism.

Keywords: *Buddhism, Five Aggregates, Society, and Saññakhandhā*

INTRODUCTION

Sanakhand embraces most of what we call thinking, concept, cognition and reasoning. It involves mental recognition or classification immediately after coming into contact with an object. The notion can be distinguished. “The felt object may be a physical or mental object, such as a thought”. Vedana is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the origin of trishna (tanha). Desire depends not only on the occurrence of the sensation but also on the occurrence of the event depends on a Special Kind of Sana. My purpose in this chapter is two-fold: first, to narrow down the meaning of the word sanakhand, and second, to show how it relates to the emergence of longing within the framework of a chain of dependent origins contributes to.

Like *Vedana*, *saññā* is usually defined concerning the six sense-doors (*āyatana*) through which the faculty is applied. Thus, *saññā* is classified in terms of (1) visible object (*rūpasaññā*), (2) sound (*saddasaññā*), (3) smell (*gandhasaññā*), (4) taste (*rasasaññā*), (5) touch (*phothtabbasaññā*) and (6) mental object (*Dhamma saññā*). Moreover, as with *Vedana*, the canonical definition of *saññā* does not shed much light on the meaning of the term since the verb used to define it (*sanjānāti*) refers to the root from which the term *saññā* is derived. Fortunately, the *Samyuttanikāya* offers us a glimpse of what *saññā* could mean by expanding on the former definition: “It is called ‘recognition’ because it ‘recognizes.’ What does it ‘recognize’? It ‘recognizes; [regarding the organ of sight] such things as blue, yellow, red, white, etc. Because it ‘recognizes,’ it is therefore called recognition.

The Words such as “to be conscious” and “consciousness”, or ‘perceive’ and ‘perceive’ are often used to translate the word Sana. However, my translation is based on the belief that ‘perception’ and ‘consciousnesses are both misleading in meanings related to Sana. On the other hand, the term ‘recognition’ implies that the subject imposes certain categories to classify it. The word ‘recognition’ cannot be mistakenly attributed to the concept of Vinana. To use our context as a supporting example for this decision, we can say that the words ‘to feel’ and ‘be aware would suggest that the object’s blueness, pallor, or redness is embodied in the object itself, Whereas ‘recognizing’ implies that the color (which may not be exactly blue, yellow or red, if such ancient colors actually exist) is ‘classified’ by linking to previous labeling. The term blue describes the same sensation. To do is nothing but one concept and different concepts to different people.

For example, one person may call two colors with different tones blue, while another may recognize these colors as indigo and aquamarine. Both have remarkably similar sensory experiences, yet their recognition differs. The classic dialogue between King Milinda and Nagasena on the definition of a chariot further exemplifies this point. Milinda cannot define the chariot without referring to all its constituent parts. The chariot is a mere category, a mental conceptualization used by the *saññā* to classify the sensory experiences resulting from contact with the external object that we usually term chariot. This recognition faculty leads to the formation of concepts, usually rendered in Pali by the expression *pannatti*. The *Anguttaranikāya* supports the analogy by elaborating on the result of *saññā*, saying that “ *saññā* always results in a ‘concept’ [*vohāra* expression of worldly usage]: whatever is conceptualized has previously been ‘saññānized’. This is very similar to the Sanskrit equivalent of the term *saññā* (*samjnā*), which usually means name, technical term, or notion.

The *Vibhanga* classifies *saññā*: into three categories: wholesome (*kusala*), unwholesome (*akusala*), and neutral (*avyākata*). Unfortunately, neither canonical nor commentarial literature sheds much light on these classifications. However, before establishing a correlation between *saññā* and the *paticcasamuppāda*, I will attempt to clarify what the text means by ‘unwholesome’ and ‘wholesome’ *saññā*.

THE UNWHOLESOME SAÑÑĀ

Like Vedana, Sana can also be considered as an obstacle to spiritual progress. While *Vibhanga* does not explain what healthy and unhealthy Sana is, *suttanipata* mentions that “there is not the slightest regard to what anyone has seen, heard or said; how in the world anyone can doubt such a Brahmin. “Can, that is, one who has not the slightest Sana, who (ditthi) does not see?” This passage implies, first of all, that the true Brahman is free from the control of Sana; And second, that Sana is associated with the generation of thoughts that stem from ignorance (*avijja*) and are therefore associated with longing and conducive to an unhealthy future. Therefore, by freeing themselves from the bondage of the eternal, these Brahmins have automatically eliminated the possibility of new beliefs and cravings. It is also said in the *Suttanipata* that “the abolition of Sana leads to the annihilation of sorrow.

This view is based on the fact that Sana is seen as the cause of ‘obsession’ (*papañca*), which hinders spiritual progress. A brief look at the word *papañca* will help us understand more thoroughly the negative aspect of *saññā*. The term *papañca* itself is problematic, for it seems to have been used differently in the *sutta*, *Abhidhamma*, and commentarial literature. In the *sutta*, the term obsession (*Upādāna*) seems interchangeable with wrong views (*ditthi*). For example, the *Suttanipāta* clearly

states that the ground of obsession lies in the belief that "I am the thinker. The *Samyuttanikāya* goes even further by saying that most human beings approach reality with obsessions. Still, if one has removed the worldly things (*gehasita*), which are the product of the mind, one move towards renunciation (*nekkhammasita*). The *Sāratthapakāsinī* vaguely explains the term *papañcasaññā*, as used in this particular passage, as the notion of obsession created by unwholesome *sanna*. This leads us to a narrower interpretation of the term, where *papañca* is used, more or less, as a synonym for desire, wrong views, and conceit.

The *Pāli Text Society Dictionary* translates the compound *papañcasaññā* as indeed fixe, a translation which renders the meaning of the term very adequately, for the *Papancasūdanī* explains the term as "the faculty of recognition associated with the obsessions related to wrong views and craving." However, clarifications on obsession are found in the *Majjhimanikāya*, where the term is used as part of a small causal chain reflecting a psychological process:

The concept of obsession is also closely associated with desire. As one of the verses of the *Theragāthā* reports, "one who follows [his] obsessions is [like] a deer delighting in obsessions which have failed to attain Nibbana, the peace from bondage and the unsurpassable. This metaphorical passage does not directly point to the association of obsession with craving. However, E.R. Sarathchandhra expands the image to arrive at the following: one ruled by his obsessions is comparable to a deer who follows a mirage thinking that it is a pool of water; the deer is thirsty and believes that the mirage (*papañca*) will quench its thirst, just as people seek happiness and are convinced that sensual pleasure will fulfill their desire, Although obsession cannot be directly correlated with craving. However, it can be associated with the emergence of lust because, as the *Sakkapanhasutta* states, envy (*issā*) and avarice (*macchariya*), as well as desire (*Chanda*), have their origin in *papañcasaññā*. Therefore, it would seem that both *saññā* and the more precise *papañcasaññā* are the necessary conditions for the arousal of craving the link of the *paticcasamuppāda* that follows *vedanā*.

This first distinction between the *saññakkhandhā* and recognition of views (*ditthisaññā*) defined as *papañcasaññā* by the *Pancappakaranakathā*-indicates that the *saññakkhandhā* does not include obsessions and that the *saññakkhandhā* itself does not inevitably generate craving. Obsessions, as well as recognition of views, would fall into the category of *sankhārakkhandhā* and not of the *saññakkhandhā*, for, as the *Nettipakāraṇa* states, "obsessions are craving, views, conceit and whatever they activate *sankhāra*. The exact text further supports this statement by saying that "whatever is the obsession, whatever are the *sankhāra* and whatever is the delighting in the past, future, and present, all these are the same. The *Yamaka* does not classify recognition of views (and obsessions) as *saññakkhandhā* because it belongs to the *sankhārakkhandhā*. As noted previously, *saññā* is often seen as the cause of obsessions. The *saññakkhandhā* is the ground for developing obsessions (as views, *ditthi*). I must stress, however, that obsession itself does not belong to the *saññakkhandhā*, for the latter is merely a function that triggers the arising of the former, which partakes of the *sankhārakkhandhā*.

THE WHOLESOME SAÑÑĀ

Saññā is not always represented as a hindrance to salvation. The *Anguttaranikāya*, for example, provides us with an example of the positive value of *saññā*. Once, the closest disciple of the Buddha, *Ānandā*, came to report that the monk *Girimānanda* had been struck by a severe illness. The Buddha

told then Ananda to visit Girimānanda and recite ‘ten *saññā*’ to the sick man; from this mere recitation, he says, ‘there are grounds to believe that the sickness will be alleviated. These ten *saññā* consisted of (1) the recognition of impermanence (*aniccasaññā*), (2) the recognition of selflessness (*anattasaññā*), (3) the recognition of unpleasantness (*asubhasaññā*), (4) the recognition of danger (*ādīnavasaññā*), (5) the recognition of abandoning (*pahanasaññā*), (6) the recognition of dispassion (*viragasaññā*), (7) the recognition of cessation (*nirodhasaññā*), (8) the recognition of disenchantment with the entire world (*sabbaloke anabhiratasaññā*), (9) the recognition of the impermanence about all compounded things (*sabbe sankhāresu aniccasaññā*), and (10) the mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*).

We may wonder why the Buddha thought there were grounds to believe that the mere recitation of these ten recognitions might alleviate the suffering of Girimānanda. The *Asibandhakaputta sutta* demonstrates that the Buddha did not think that the power of words could alter one's destiny; hence for him to say that the mere recitation of the ten *saññā* would improve Girimānanda's future seems incongruous. However, it is possible that he meant that hearing the ten *saññā* might encourage Girimānanda to develop these recognitions- this would result, if not in a cure for the sickness itself, in alleviating the unhappiness that caused it.

To my knowledge, the whole Pāli canon, along with its commentaries, support the view that *saññā* can be wholesome when it is geared toward the recognition of elements essential for liberation. What is important to note is that three main components are explicitly or implicitly incorporated in all of these lists: the recognition of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and selflessness (*anatta*).

As hinted above, these three main elements constitute the basis for Wisdom. Therefore, to attain the goal, whether *nibbāna* with or without residue or even *saññāvidayitanirodha*, what is required by the practitioner is to have developed Wisdom through *vipassanā*, insight, which in turn is cultivated by the awareness of impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. As Buddhaghosa states in the *Visuddhimagga*, there are eighteen significant kinds of *vipassanā*, and six of these eighteen are among the various enumerations of wholesome *saññā* seen above. These are impermanence, selflessness, suffering, dispassion, eradication, and danger (*ādīnava*). Cultivating this wholesome *saññā* will not lead to a further generation of cravings. Still, it will help to develop Wisdom through which one can break away from the cycle of life and death and the chain of dependent origination.

CONCLUSION

The concept of the wholesome *Saññā* and the *Saññakkhandhā* may wonder whether or not this wholesome *saññā* does belong to the *saññāakkhandhā*. Buddhaghosa argues in the *Visuddhimagga* that the function of *saññā* as one of the aggregates is to recognize objects as ‘blue,’ ‘yellow,’ and so forth. The *saññakkhandhā*, according to this text, cannot lead to the penetration of the characteristics of existence: one could not, through the faculty of recognition, grasp at the deepest level the characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. Buddhaghosa goes on to establish, through a metaphor, a radical difference between the *saññakkhandhā* and Wisdom (*paññā*). While the former merely recognizes the appearance of objects, the latter analyzes every object and perceives it as impermanent, painful, and selfless from a Buddhist perspective. According to the *Visuddhimagga*, the *saññakkhandhā* cannot deeply apprehend these three characteristics of existence. Yet, the discussion of the various wholesome *saññā* indicates that there can be recognition

of impermanence (*aniccasaññā*), suffering (*dukkhasaññā*), and selflessness (*anattasaññā*). As evidenced by the *sumangalavilāsinī*, there are “five *saññā* leading to liberation. Also interesting to note is that three of these five *saññā* are contemplations of the three characteristics of existence”. The *Sumangalavilāsinī* implies not only that the object of *saññā* can be the three characteristics of reality but also that these very recognitions can lead to liberation through the development of Wisdom.

The *Visuddhimagga*, as I have noted, claims that the primary function of the *saññakkhandhā* is to interpret by means of a sign (*nimitta*). The term *nimitta*, in this context, refers to the outward appearances of an object and excludes the more subtle attributes that characterize every phenomenon of existence. For example, a particular kind of deliverance described as signless (*animitta*) is interpreted in the *Atthasālinī* as the result of the practice of the threefold contemplation. By observing the “three characteristics of existence”, one attains the deliverance known as the ‘signless.’ The signs, in this context, are the beliefs in permanence, delight, and self, which are all outward appearances not reflecting reality as they are characterized by impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. While the *saññakkhandhā* itself is concerned with recognizing the outward appearances, the signs, the wholesome *saññā* apprehends the ‘signless.’ Therefore, since wholesome *saññā* do not apprehend signs, they cannot be classified as members of the *saññakkhandhā*, for the latter only deals with appearances.

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