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The Five Aggregates: Understanding Theravada Psychology and Soteriology. Mathieu Boisvert, Editions SR Vol.17, Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion/Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses, Wilfred Laurier Press, 1995, xii +166 pages, ISBN: 0-88920-257-5, US \$24.95.

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

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

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

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

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

also beyond the clinging that others may try to focus on them.

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

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

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

In the chapter on “The *Saññākkhandha*”, Boisvert emphasises the role of *saññā* in helping *vedanā* lead on to craving. He prefers “recognition” as the translation of *saññā* as it “tends to imply that the subject imposes cer-

tain categories upon the percept in order to classify it” (p.78). Yet while the latter statement is an appropriate one on *saññā*, “recognition” has the unfortunate connotation that it is always a form of correct knowledge. In English, to say one “recognises” something or someone precludes any error in cognition. *Saññā* certainly is a form of classificatory, labelling, interpreting activity, but it includes both correct labelling (“recognition”) and incorrect labelling (misinterpretation). For this reason, I prefer the more neutral “cognition”. The more usual “perception” is certainly too broad, as it covers the combined activity of *saññā* and *viññāna*, and in any case hardly covers *saññā* of a mental object.

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

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

In the chapter on “The *Viññāṇakkhandha*”, Boisvert argues against the view that *viññāṇa* is “bare sensations devoid of any content” (p.117), holding that it is “probably the faculty needed for the cognition of pure percept, of sensation and of conceptualisation as well” (p.118). This is generally correct, but the analysis, here, would have been improved by some

reference to the theory of the *citta-vīthi*, or “process of *cittas*”, found fully developed in the commentaries, in skeletal form in the *Paṭṭhāna*, and even alluded to in seed form in the Suttas. This is basically the theory of the perceptual process as a series of mind-states which sequentially process any object. In this, what is known by “eye-*viññāṇa*” is less than what is known e.g. by following “mind-*viññāṇa*” performing the function of “determining”. The first is visual awareness which discerns the presence of a visual object, and also discerns its basic components, labelled by accompanying *saññā*. The second is discernment operating at a more abstract level, in unison with accompanying *saññā* labelling the aspects so made out. Boisvert goes on to ignore the concept of *bhavaṅga*, which is also part of the theory of the “process of *cittas*”. *Bhavaṅga* is the resting state of consciousness which occurs uninterrupted in dreamless sleep, and which is momentarily reverted to in waking consciousness between each act of processing a sense-object. In interpreting M.I.190 (p.119), Boisvert criticises any idea of a “‘mind’ which applies the ‘act of attention’” to an object when it is known. Yet *bhavaṅga* is such a concept of a mind-ready-to-act (though it is replaced by the more active *cittas* which follow it in the “process of *cittas*”). M.I.190 describes how *viññāṇa* and its accompaniments arise when there is an intact sense organ, a relevant sense-object within range, and an “appropriate *samannāhāra*”. Boisvert renders the latter phrase as “with these brought together” (p.119), rather than Jayatilleke’s “appropriate act of attention”. Jayatilleke is correct, though, as *samannāhāra* is a synonym of *manasikāra*, “attention” (Vibh. 321, M.I.445). Moreover, in the case of hearing, at least, it is clear that an intact ear and an audible sound does not always lead to awareness of sound, if one’s attention is directed elsewhere.

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

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

Nidāna		Khandha
<i>viññāṇa</i>		<i>viññāṇa</i>
<i>nāma-rūpa</i>		All five <i>khandhas</i>

<i>saḷāyatana</i>		<i>rūpa</i>
<i>phassa</i>		<i>rūpa</i>
<i>vedanā</i>		<i>vedanā</i>
		<i>saññā</i>
<i>taṇhā</i>		<i>saṅkhāras</i>
<i>upādāna</i>		<i>saṅkhāras</i>
<i>bhava</i>		<i>saṅkhāras</i>

A key point, here, is his idea that *viññāṇa*, as the fifth *khandha*, completes a circle by going on to condition the first *khandha* by allowing the arising of sensory contact (*phassa*). In general, this is acceptable, though one could argue (I do not have space here), that *bhava*, at least in part, includes the operation of *viññāṇa*. One can, in any case, explain the logic of the *khandha* ordering as follows:

CONDITIONING SEQUENCE IN PERCEPTUAL PROCESS	KHANDHA
Dependent upon eye and visual form: arises eye- <i>viññāṇa</i> ;	<i>rūpa</i>
the meeting of the three is <i>phassa</i> ;	<i>vedanā</i>
from <i>phassa</i> arises <i>vedanā</i> ;	<i>saññā</i>
<i>saññā</i> then processes the visual object;	<i>saṅkhāras</i>
the <i>saṅkhāras</i> respond to it;	
mind- <i>viññāṇa</i> takes in the fully labelled and responded-to object	<i>viññāṇa</i>

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

Boisvert is right to see *saññā* as implied as operating between the *vedanā* and *taṇhā nidānas* (pp.136-42), though one can also see (unwholesome) *saññā* as equivalent to spiritual ignorance (*avijjā*), the first of the twelve *nidānas*. This can be seen from S.732, which says “all

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

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

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

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

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