

December 2015

Greetings!

First I want to wish everyone a joyous holiday season and a very happy new year. I would like to apologize for the delay of this email. At different times both Allan and Geoff said that it was a bit confusing, so we had to re-work it a few times. I hope it now makes sense. I would like to thank Allan and Geoff. If it wasn't for their work on these emails it would not be possible to do them.

With this email, I would like to conclude our series on the self with a discussion of the skandhas. In Buddhism, all of existence is categorized into five skandhas. They are (1) form or matter; (2) sensations or feelings; (3) thought or perceptions; (4) impulses and activity; (5) consciousness. What we call the self is comprised of these skandhas or components. The skandhas are all temporary, and the self is nothing more than a temporary coming together of these components. Clearly then the self cannot provide any enduring refuge. Another way of viewing the skandhas would be as habit energies that tend to keep us grasping after things, or put another way, tend to convince us that they (the self) provide a refuge. Our training is to see the skandhas for what they really are, and rather than being convinced by them, we come to see that their true nature is that of the Eternal.

Shakyamuni often spoke of the Five Skandhas, also called the Five Aggregates or the Five Heaps. Shakyamuni also taught the Four Noble Truths. He began with the First Noble Truth; life is full of dukkha (suffering). As we have said before, suffering comes from clinging to the delusions of the self. Understanding the skandhas is helpful in seeing through the illusion of self. But by "understanding" here we do not primarily mean intellectual understanding. Instead we mean a "blood and bones" understanding that can only come through actual practice. This is where the meditation, mindfulness and stillness come in. By putting these things into practice we naturally allow the magnificent Purity, with its love, kindness, and compassion, to flow through the skandhas. And as we allow this to happen, then over time, our attachments to self weaken.

Before I continue, let me speak a bit about the first skandha. Form, or matter, or body, is a skandha to which we create a powerful attachment. We forget that this body of ours is temporary and impermanent. We seek great refuge in it. Then, when it starts to get old, sicken, and decay, we become quite fearful, worried, angry, and full of despair. This leads us to a state of deep and painful suffering.

An example from my own training will help to further explain the skandhas. This example is probably familiar to many of you, in varying degrees. A situation that has always been difficult for me is when someone demeans or belittles me. My self has many reactions to this. Initially, I get tremendous feelings of hurt (second skandha – sensations or feelings) and sometimes this can turn to anger against the offending person. My self seeks to interpret these feelings by perceiving itself to be incomplete or inadequate, or I could get thoughts (third skandha) that the other person is wrong and

acting out of malevolence. Impulses (fourth skandha) arise to attack the other person with words or sometimes I internalize these impulses and just sulk. This again goes back to the second skandha, with bodily sensations taking over, sometimes leading to headaches or greatly disrupting my digestion. We can see how the skandhas delineate the aspects of the self, particularly the second, third, and fourth. The fifth, consciousness, is our awareness, which is the basis for all experience. When consciousness becomes clouded by the other skandhas, we live a life where suffering is much more prominent, instead of a much more peaceful existence.

Another example, which I'm sure many of us can relate to, is politics and world events, and those who are involved in it. I'm pretty sure most of us have a visceral reaction, and can feel our gut tighten (second skandha) when it comes to these situations. In this case, our thoughts or perceptions (third skandha) are our opinions and prejudices, which the self clings to. Impulses and activity (fourth skandha) can take on pretty intense manifestations, from shouting to, I'm afraid to say, physical violence in some cases. We can see how these various elements of the self cause us pain, both physically and spiritually. It is through the training and meditation that we are able to loosen the hold of the self and lessen our suffering. We let the Eternal, with its love, compassion, and wisdom flow through the skandhas and convert them to a state of peace and love. How do we do this? Well, in this instance, we catch ourselves, maybe at the point of having some thoughts of outrage about the actions of some politician, world event, or whatever it is that really gets under our skin. This acts as a signal to us. Instead of letting that thought lead to another, and another, and another, and then to action based on that; instead of this, we simply see the thoughts and let them go without adding to them. Probably many more similar thoughts will follow, but each time, we can catch them, and allow them to pass through. Over time, our training and meditation greatly increase our ability, our wish, and our willingness, to do this. And each time we do it, instead of the upset we feel by running with the thoughts, and feelings, we feel a peacefulness and compassion for all involved in the situation.

To reiterate, it is important to realize that the skandhas, the elements of the self, are impermanent and also to know that they are part of the Eternal, as everything is. The difficulty lies in our becoming attached to their convincing nature. They simply exist. When they become strong, we can use this as a signal to return to the love of the Eternal, rather than being consumed by the powerful attachments.

As I have said before, from my own training, I know it is very difficult to do this – much easier to talk about than to actually practice. I have had discussions about this with the various groups in Seattle, but I also know from my own training that it is very worth doing. When we follow the training and meditation, we are moving into a place of deep freedom. It is the freedom of not being controlled by the skandhas, and allowing ourselves a life of great peace.

This concludes our series on the teaching of the self. I want to reiterate that my purpose in this series was to try to make this teaching as understandable as possible. When I started training, I really had no understanding of these concepts of self, but slowly I began to grasp it, and ultimately apply it in my daily life. I can't express enough how

much this has helped me and continues to do so. I am now much more aware of the different states when they arise, such as fear, anxiety, anger, pride, despair, and stubbornness. Whereas I used to be overwhelmed and confused by them, I can now see when I am led by my skandhas and how they lead to my suffering and getting into trouble. With the training and meditation, we can become aware of these elements of the self, and allow ourselves to live in a much more peaceful and harmonious state.

Before I end this email, I want to bring up something that I have heard from people over the years, which is that since the true and beneficent nature of the Eternal flows through everything, why do we need to do the training? This is a valid question, which one of our great ancestors, Master Eihei Dogen also asked. When it was resolved, it marked a major turning point in his spiritual life. Let me give a metaphor here to help explain this. We may buy a piece of property with a strong mountain stream under the surface of the land. We could just acknowledge it is there and do nothing about it; or in order to get the benefit of it, we could dig down to get it. When the stream is reached, we have to bring the water to the surface. It is an ongoing process to receive the benefits of the water. Thus it is with the flow of the Eternal and training. Our training allows us to dig down and bring this Flow to the surface so that it manifests in our lives. In the beginning we tend to do the training in order derive some benefit for ourselves. We may be motivated by a desire to feel more at peace, or by the desire to be “enlightened”. As we go on, our motivation changes and instead we may train out of a desire to be of benefit to others. But in the end, if we just keep going, the training becomes our natural way of being. We no longer seek any reward, we simply train for the sake of training, and in this there is great joy. So, the real answer to the question, “why should we train?” is, because it is our true nature to do so.

Take care,

With all my heart,
Reverend Basil