Dharmette: The Bundles (3 of 5) Recognition

Gil Fronsdal

November 04, 2026

Keywords: five *khandhas*, five aggregates, recognition, *saññā*, *Vipassanā*, clinging, delusion, mental constructs, suffering, *Buddha*

So, hello everyone, and welcome. As I continue the series on the five bundles, the five *khandhas*, usually called the five aggregates, for those of us who read the teachings of the *Buddha*, these teachings about the five bundles are pervasive in this earliest teaching.

And now we come to the third bundle of clinging, the third bundle, which is the bundle created from the recognitions: the simple ideas by which we see the world and recognize what is happening around us. Those recognitions can be very simple, and they can be very complicated. We can see not just a thing, but we can see the meaning of the thing. And there is nothing necessarily wrong with that. It actually adds to the richness of life.

You know, something that was handed down to us, given to us by a dear friend or family member, might be a very ordinary object. But because it was given by someone who was important to us, or it was passed down through the generations to us, or something, there are associated meanings that add to the richness of our life. That is nice. Not a problem.

But we can also have recognitions that are complicated because they carry delusion, they carry bias, and they carry ways in which we see people in very limited ways. We recognize people only because of their role, only because of how they have hurt us, only because of their politics, only because of something. We kind of limit who they are in our eyes. Or we only see them for what they did in the past, or we only see them for what they can do for us in the future.

So, the act of recognition is not necessarily an innocent act, but a lot can go into it. And some of that has to do with the stories, the values, the wider picture of things, our preferences, and our dreams. And so we can pile a lot of things on top of the simplest recognition of what something is. And that is where attachments begin. That is where desires can be so strong

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

that we suffer, that we cling, that we resist, that we hold on tight, that we grieve when we lose in some deep, deep way.

That is grieving the pain, the pain of the attachment that is being somehow challenged. And that is where we can get angry and hostile and even violent sometimes, when the complicated ways that recognition is built on layers and layers of stories and desires. So, part of what we are doing in mindfulness practice is coming back to the simplest possible way, in the present moment, of recognizing what is happening.

In some *Vipassanā* traditions, that act of recognition is called a mental note: a simple field note. Warm, cold, tightness, tension, softness, calm, agitation. It can be that simple. Rather than, "I'm agitated, and I'm agitated because of what happened at work yesterday. And I'm always wronged by my boss, and I need to write a letter, and I have to right the wrong, and protest, and I'm going to get back at my boss. I'm going to put salt in their sugar container so when they drink their coffee..."

And it goes on and on. The recognition is not simple; it is layers and layers of stories and interpretations and meanings and ideas. But just, "Oh, just simple agitated mind. Oh." Without the whole story, things will open up. There is space. There is quiet. There is stillness around our experience that holds it with some kind of kindness.

It holds it with some meaningful way that allows a freeing of the discursive mind. It allows a freeing of our reactivity so that we can experience ourselves in a deeper and deeper way. And so, one of the very important places we get caught is with recognition. Recognition by itself is not a bundle. Recognition itself is not necessarily a problem, but it is what we add on top of the recognition where there is some kind of clinging, grabbing, some kind of attachment.

There is a gathering, a bundling of recognitions, a bundling of meaning. So, you know, I might see someone wearing a nice pair of shoes. And I see them as shoes. I see them as beautiful shoes. I see them as shoes that I want to have. I see that I have enough shoes at home, but I probably deserve to buy a new pair of shoes because I have had a hard time lately.

So I probably deserve to buy new shoes because that will make me feel better and happier, and I will feel more comfortable being in public. And I think it is a good idea to get new shoes. And if I do not get the new shoes, I probably will not make my way in the world very well, and people will not like me, and I will not get a promotion. And there are layers and layers of these ideas on top of the idea of simply a shoe, or simply wanting shoes, or appreciating the shoes.

And so, one of the five bundles is the bundles of these recognitions that we are holding onto.

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

Bundles of recognition that stick to us and stick to our eyes, in a sense, are the filters through which we see the world. And it is the bundles that the *Buddha* says that we need to overcome. It is not recognition. It is how we have gathered all these bundles together that have a lot to do with the story-making mind, the meaning-making mind, the desiring mind.

It adds layers and layers of meaning and purpose to the simple recognitions we can have. And so, the mind is definitely involved in creating the inner ideas that we get attached to, that we cling to. And in fact, mostly what we cling to is not things of the world, but the ideas we have about those things. The stories we make and all this sort of stuff. And so, the idea of ideas, simple recognition, is often not that simple.

And it is the bundles that the *Buddha* wants us to untie. It is the bundles that the *Buddha* would like us to shed, to drop, so we do not drop. And often in English, these, like the five aggregates, any simple act of recognition—this word is *saññā* in *Pāli*—is usually translated into English as perception. But perception can be seen as being something very innocent that has more to do with what we are seeing, whereas recognition honors how this word *saññā* is a way in which we participate, we create, we have an act of recognition.

We see it again based on previous ideas, associations, memories, and it is recognizing something based on previous experience. And so the mind, and what mind carries, has a role. And so we build stories and universes on our simple way of seeing the world, and we do not see it simply anymore. And sometimes, in fact, when we see things in the world, we do not see it for what it is. We see it through the filter of our delusion, through our assumptions, through our predictions, through our built-up ideas.

So these are a big problem for us. There is a lot of suffering that we cause ourselves and cause the world around us. And the brilliance of the *Buddha* was to point to this: that our ordinary human capacity to recognize is connected to ideas and histories and ideas in the mind. And those can be the recipe for where we get caught, where we get stuck.

And if we want to be unstuck, if we want to stop clinging, if we want to stop suffering, we need to let go of the bundle. We need to untie the bundle, let all the sticks that are being held together fall down and disappear, so that we can see freely. These five bundles are so important that in some places the *Buddha's* definition of suffering—what suffering actually is—is the collected mass of these five bundles. And if we want to overcome suffering, we have to somehow put down the bundles.

Sometimes the bundles are called burdens or a heavy load that we are carrying. And so the idea is to be able to put down the bundles, put down the heavy load of ideas, associations,

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

stories, and meaning to which we are attached or clinging. It is possible to have associations, stories, meaning, and all that enrich our life, but for which there is no attachment, no clinging to, no holding on tight. And so we are much more fluid and resilient and adaptable to go through the world and respond kindly, generously, compassionately, as is needed in this world.

A way that we cannot, if we are tied up in our bundles, because it is not just that we make bundles; we tie ourselves to the bundles, and that limits us dramatically. So, the five aggregates, bundles, *khandhas*—I call them appearances, sensations, recognition, mental constructs, which will be the topic of tomorrow, and then cognition. And the mental constructs—that whole world that constructs all kinds of these stories, ideas—is said to be what constructs the other bundles. So they have this—the constructing mind, the building mind that makes things up, builds things up—that has a central role in making the bundles.

So that will be very important to look at: the next one, mental constructs, tomorrow. So, thank you.

Transcript is machine generated and may contain errors.
Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International