

# THE FIVE SKANDHAS & EMPTINESS

## SYLLABUS

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1999 Vajradhatu Seminary  
Teachings from the Sutra Tradition  
Book II

### **CLASS 1: INTRODUCTION**

Organization, passing out syllabi, etc.

Video: The Five Skandhas, Talk 4 of the Tibetan Buddhist Path course given by the Vidyadhara Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche at Naropa Institute on June 19, 1974.

This video provides a quite good overview of the skandhas, and a visual connection with the Vidyadhara. It lays a good ground for diving into the details. The talk itself is about 50 minutes, with some 14 minutes of questions which are good if you have time to play them.

Transcripts and videos can be ordered from <shop@shambhala.org>

### **CLASS 2: THE FIVE SKANDHAS: PART I**

“So Buddha was asked ‘If I don’t exist and the whole thing doesn’t exist, then how come I feel like I do? How come I call myself a self and how come we have this word ‘I’?’ So at that point Buddha explained it by...picking up some dirt and putting it in five heaps...the word in Tibetan *phungpo*...is heaping.”

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, 1999 Sutrayana Book II, Talk 3

### **READINGS:**

1999 TRANSCRIPTS: SUTRAYANA BOOK II -- TALK 3

“The Five Skandhas” pp. 76-77

“The Skandha of Form: Causal Forms, Resultant Forms, & Forms for the Mental Consciousness” pp. 77-82

“The Skandhas of Feeling and Discrimination” pp. 82-84

“The Skandha of Formation - 51 Mental Factors” pp. 84-85

“Five Omnipresent Mental Factors” pp. 85-87

“Five Mental Factors that Cause the Ascertainment of Objects” pp. 87-90  
“Eleven Mental Factors Whose Nature is Virtue (*gewa*)” pp. 90-103

Reference: Appendix Y, “The Fifty One Mental Factors”

**Questions for Discussion:**

Distinguish “Form” from “Consciousness”. How are the Four Great Elements “causal”? Does the discussion of causal forms amount to a Buddhist “Creation Theory”?

Differentiate the Five Sense Powers of the Eleven Resultant Forms from the Sense Consciousness to be discussed later. If there are Five Powers and their five objects, how do we arrive at Eleven Resultant Forms?

Can the Skandhas of Feeling and Discrimination be experienced individually by practitioners? Why are they separated from the other 51 mental factors in the Fourth Skandha?

The first 10 of the 51 Mental Factors are the Five Omnipresent and the Five Factors Causing Ascertainment. How are these sets of 5 distinguished from each other? Discuss the significance of the last three of the Factors Causing Ascertainment?

Are the Eleven Virtuous Factors (*gewa*) required for Shamatha or developed by Shamatha or both? Does a higher view (the view of emptiness, for example) change your answer?

Are the 51 a complete picture of conceptual mind? Are there factors that seem to be missing?

**CLASS 3: THE FIVE SKANDHAS: PART II: THE FORTH SKANDHA -- FORMATION (CONTINUED)**

“We do have a tendency of sometimes holding the practice at bay...and having the practice have to prove itself to us...before we jump in...we call it *dawa chog dzin*...thinking that what you are doing is supreme. Having a view...there is a quality that “My view is the best.” and “What I think is the best”. And the practice has to come up to that level, or has to do “The things that I want it to do”...And that’s called *dawa chog dzin*, one of the root afflictions.”

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, 1999 Sutrayana Book II, Talk 5

**READINGS:**

1999 TRANSCRIPTS: SUTRAYANA PART II -- TALK 3  
“The Skandha of Formation - 51 Mental Factors” (continued)

“The Six Root Afflictions” pp. 103-108  
“The Twenty Secondary Afflictions” pp. 108-118  
“The Four Changeable Mental Factors” p. 118-120

Reference: Appendix Y, “The Fifty One Mental Factors”

1996 TRANSCRIPTS: HINAYANA—MAHAYANA -- TALK 5  
“The Three Trainings”  
Discipline: Body, Speech & Mind pp. 89-95  
(1996 Hinayana only, pp 88-950)

### **Questions for Discussion:**

Why are the Six Root Kleshas “afflictions”? What is being afflicted? Identify each root affliction and their result. What is the point of studying these?

Which kleshas are innate and which are said to be acquired? How can we work with the acquired kleshas? The innate kleshas?

How does the study of the 6th Root Affliction inform your understanding of the role of “wrong views” in perpetuating Samsara and “fruitless weariness”. What is “wrong” with “wrong views”?

How are the Twenty Secondary Afflictions “secondary”? How and when do we work with them?

Are the Four Changeable Mental Factors virtuous or non-virtuous?

### **CLASS 4: THE FIVE SKANDHAS: PART III: THE FIFTH SKANDHA -- CONSCIOUSNESS**

“How far does this go up? You can say, well, the bodhisattva who is on the tenth bhumi level is still experiencing the seventh consciousness when he’s in jethop or postmeditation. It is not until you get to buddhahood or sanggye, unadulterated complete buddhahood, that is when the both the seventh and eighth consciousnesses dissolve and you see their true reality.”

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, 1999 Sutrayana Book II, Talk 5

### **READINGS:**

1999 TRANSCRIPTS: SUTRAYANA BOOK II -- TALK 5  
“Consciousness: The Fifth Skandha” pp. 137-150

“Review of the Skandhas & Consciousnesses” pp. 150-153

1996 TRANSCRIPTS: HINAYANA—MAHAYANA -- TALK 11  
THE PARAMITAS

“Mara” pp. 208-210

(1999 Mahayana only, Talk 6, pp. 112-114)

### **Questions for Discussion:**

Can the sense consciousness function without the sense powers? What differentiates the sense consciousnesses from the sixth consciousness? What consciousness do we work with in Shamatha?

How does the seventh, or afflicted consciousness, perpetuate the sense of “I”? What are the 4 ways that the seventh consciousness possesses similarity with the kleshas? When would the bodhisattva have the experience of the seventh consciousness ceasing?

Explain the four qualities of the alaya, the all basis, or eighth consciousness. Does the eighth consciousness have an object?

How does the alaya become “perfumed” or “infused” with gewa or mi-gewa?

What are the three manifestations of “seeds” planted in the alaya bearing fruit? How is this perspective consonant with the yogacharin view?

### **CLASS 5: VALID COGNITION (TSEMA), VIEW, MERIT, VIRTUE AND BECOMING DHARMIC PERSON**

“So the Buddha utilized *tönchi* in saying ‘Emptiness is like this. Emptiness is like that. Or Emptiness is not like this or not like that. Bodhicitta is like this. Bodhicitta is not like that.’ As we read more and more, our *tönchi*, a general idea of what we think it [emptiness] is, becomes more and more accurate. So it’s using signs, it’s using symbols. And we realize that symbols cannot lead us ultimately to the thing itself, but can begin to show us the direction.”

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, 1999 Sutrayana Book II, Talk 6

### **READINGS:**

1999 TRANSCRIPTS: SUTRAYANA PART II

TALK 6: Emptiness pp 167-184

1996 TRANSCRIPTS: HINAYANA—MAHAYANA

TALK 2: SHRAVAKAS & PRATYEKABUDDHAS

The Five Paths, pp 45-47

(Hinayana only, Talk 2, pp. 41-45)

TALK 9: UNDERSTANDING EMPTINESS

“Emptiness and Appearance” pp. 182-183

(Mahayana only, Talk 4, pp. 86 – 87)

TALK 11: THE PARAMITAS

“Three Fold Purity” pp. 207-208

(Mahayana only, Talk 6, pp. 111 – 112)

“Applying Three Fold Purity” pp. 210-211

(Mahayana only, Talk 6, pp 114 – 115)

TALK 12: QUESTIONS AND REVIEW

“Jepak--Accumulation of Sonam--Pretending” pp. 230-236

(Mahayana only, Talk 7, pp. 134 – 140)

VIDEO: BECOMING A DHARMIC PERSON TALK 5 (pp. 1 - 14)

**Questions for Discussion:**

Describe the process of perception of a form. What is the significance of moment two, *rang-rik* or self-knowing, in the context of meditation?

Explain how the sixth consciousness “knows” through the operation of inference (jepak) and meaning generality (tönchi). What are the objects available to the sixth consciousness?

Discuss view in terms of the evolution of tönchi through the First Three of the Five Paths of Mahayana. When does ngönsum, or direct perception, occur? Is view related to the traditional accumulation of merit, or sonam?

If the basic nature of mind is “non-associated or non-allied”, how do you understand the development of virtue or gewa?

## Contemplative Exercises

In talk six, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche introduces some contemplative exercises that use certain thoughts, or *tönchi*, to understand the five skandhas.

“...we start by trying to understand what the notion of self is. It may seem like we don’t need to be told what the self is. But through these exercises, we can gain a deeper understanding. Before we start talking about selflessness, let’s get a sense of who the self is. What is that exactly? *Where* is it exactly?”

It could be skillful to introduce these exercises early in the course, and do one exercise either before or at the beginning of each class. It should take about fifteen minutes: a brief introduction followed by four or five minutes of contemplation, and some ten minutes of discussion. These brief investigations into the experience of self will then serve as a basis for discussions of the five skandhas and emptiness.

What follows are suggestions as to how these exercises might be distributed through the course:

### Introductory Instruction

“I will read a sentence and then we will all have that thought in mind and notice our experience. Once we’ve sat for a few minutes and we have a feeling of whatever the experience is—it doesn’t matter what it is; there is no right and wrong here—then...” we can discuss what we have experienced. “...This is a way of trying to understand the middle way. It starts with the very basic principle of noticing what is going on. It is a sense of awareness, a sense of mindfulness.”

### Class 2: The Five Skandhas: Part I

“When you think of a part of your body you like, what happens to the sense of self?”  
(Contemplate for about 2 minutes)

“When you think of a part of the body you do not like, what happens to the sense of self?” (2 minutes)

Discussion (10 minutes)

### Class 3: The Five Skandhas: Part II: The Fourth Skandha—Formation.

“When you think of someone you like what happens to the sense of self?” (2 minutes)

“When you think of someone you dislike, what happens to the sense of self?” (2 minutes)

“When you think of someone you neither like nor dislike but feel neutral towards, what happens to the sense of self?” (2 minutes)

Discussion (10 minutes)

#### **Class 4: The Five Skandhas: Part III: The Fifth Skandha—Consciousness**

“When you think of succeeding or being praised, what happens to the sense of self?” (2 minutes)

“When you think of failing or being criticized, what happens to the sense of self?” (2 minutes)

Discussion (10 minutes)

#### **Class 5: Valid Cognition (tsema), View, Merit, Virtue and Becoming a Dharmic Person**

“When you gaze upon objects upon the shrine or pictures of the teachers, what happens to the sense of self?” (2 minutes)

“Imagine the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in the space before you, seated at the level of your own head. He is seated upon a white lotus and a white disk of the moon. His body is white in color. His palms are joined in front of his heart. He embodies the compassion of all the buddhas of the past, present and future. The atmosphere resonates with the sound of his mantra: OM MANI PADME HUM. Smiling, he gazes at you with love and gentleness. When you visualize this, what happens to the sense of self?” (2 minutes)

“Imagine the bodhisattva Manjugoshaya, Manjushri, in the space before you, seated at the level of your head. He is seated upon a white lotus and a yellow disk of the sun. His body is orange in color. In his right hand he holds the blazing sword of wisdom aloft. In his left hand he holds the stem of a white lotus flower that curves gracefully to his left. Upon the lotus flower rests a sutra of transcendent wisdom. He embodies the wisdom of all the buddhas of the past, present and future. The atmosphere resonates with the sound of his mantra: OM ARAPACHANA DHI. With the unwavering gaze of insight, he looks into space.” (2 minutes)

Discussion (10 minutes)