

Skandhas

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Skandhas are the groups of attributes that constitute a changing personality. The word suggests bundles or aggregates: bodily form, sensations, ideas, mental tendencies and powers of awareness gathered into the experience we ordinarily call ourselves. In Theosophical teaching these combinations arise under karma, develop through a lifetime and provide conditions for later embodiment. Their importance is both philosophical and immediate. They help explain why a familiar reaction can feel inseparable from our identity, while leaving open the possibility that we can understand and change our relationship to it.

H.P. Blavatsky gives a fivefold enumeration in *The Key to Theosophy*: *Rupa*, form or body; *Vedana*, sensations; *Sanna*, abstract ideas; *Samkhara*, tendencies of mind; and *Vinnana*, mental powers. *The Theosophical Glossary* supplies related spellings and descriptions and also mentions an esoteric sevenfold account. These lists belong to particular contexts. Their purpose is to distinguish aspects of conditioned existence, rather than to establish five independent little selves living inside one person. A sensation, the idea attached to it and the habit of responding to it participate in a connected process.

The distinction between personality and individuality gives this process its Theosophical setting. Personality includes the particular body, memories, capacities and relationships of a lifetime. Individuality refers to the enduring spiritual intelligence that gathers experience through successive embodiments. The *skandhas* belong to the changing combinations through which that experience occurs. They are consequential without being ultimate. Theosophy develops their meaning within its teaching of a reincarnating Ego; that framework should remain explicit when comparing its account with Buddhist explanations of the aggregates.

Continuity does not require the whole familiar personality to return unchanged. Blavatsky describes successive births as a succession of personalities, held together through karmic affinities and the thirst for embodied life. A new life therefore cannot be understood as an old social identity wearing a different face. The aggregate changes while causes continue to bear consequences. This distinction also discourages careless claims about past lives. A recurring attraction or fear may invite honest observation; by itself, it does not establish the story of an earlier incarnation.

The Key to Theosophy further distinguishes the ennobling essence of experience from attributes associated with selfish motives. In its dialogue, the Enquirer describes the former as joining the incarnating Ego and the latter as returning through karmic consequences. The Theosophist

confirms this with an additional qualification: the higher qualities also receive opportunities for further development on earth. Personality is thus a field of assimilation and responsibility. Its nobler possibilities matter, and what has been distorted calls for transformation rather than denial.

Professor Iyer brings the doctrine into the study of freedom. In “Noetic Self-Determination,” he describes persisting tendencies of thought and character reinforced by emotions, desires and habits. An occasional departure from a habit does not necessarily change the assumptions sustaining it. We may resolve to listen patiently and still believe that disagreement threatens our worth. When that belief remains unexamined, the next conversation can restore the old defensiveness. The difficulty is understandable: a decision has changed, but the pattern that interprets the situation continues to operate.

Prarabdha karma names, in this discussion, the conditions with which an incarnation has begun. Professor Iyer includes body, character, heredity and environment in that field. His recognition of their weight is paired with an affirmation of the deeper powers of volition and ideation. Manasic self-consciousness can question the associations it has inherited. We begin to discover freedom by seeing relationships, asking why a response occurs and taking responsibility for the consequences of repeating it. This is a sustained education of will, with insight gradually informing action.

The distinction between psychic and noetic activity is essential here. Psychic activity follows the familiar movement of attraction, aversion and personal association. Noetic activity draws upon a more impersonal intelligence, capable of considering the meaning and consequences of the whole pattern. *Manas* becomes receptive to *Buddhi* when thought seeks truth beyond the immediate demands of self-image. The change is not measured by the force with which someone suppresses a feeling. It is better recognized in clearer perception, a more considered response and greater concern for those affected.

Consider receiving a correction from someone with whom we have a difficult history. The words arrive together with memories, bodily tension and an expectation of humiliation. Before the actual point has been understood, a defence may already be forming. Self-study can separate these strands. What was said? What have I supplied from memory? Is the correction useful, unfair, or partly both? Such questions do not require accepting mistreatment. They make room to answer the present situation with proportion, instead of allowing an old bundle of reactions to answer everything at once.

This practice should include tenderness toward the instrument being trained. A pattern may have been reinforced over many years, and recognizing it does not make it vanish immediately. One can review a conversation, acknowledge the harm of a sharp reply and prepare a more

truthful response next time. Repair is itself an action with consequences. Repeated effort gives a new direction to attention and conduct. The teaching offers neither an instant cure nor an excuse for resignation; it asks us to cultivate the conditions under which a different response becomes possible.

In “Light, Love and Hope,” Professor Iyer widens the picture further. Our aggregate of *skandhas* represents a karmic share in the accumulated tendencies of humanity. His image is a common growth of weeds, with each person having a portion to tend while sowing wisdom and compassion. Human Solidarity follows from this shared inheritance. Resentment, fear and the hunger for recognition are familiar human possibilities, though their circumstances differ. To lessen their influence in ourselves is also to lessen what we contribute to relationships, communities and the atmosphere in which others must live.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception therefore changes the question of personal improvement. We can ask how a habit affects the people who depend upon us, which conditions repeatedly strengthen it, and what form of help would support lasting change. A household that makes room for honest correction can educate everyone within it. A workplace that rewards exaggeration may cultivate the very distrust it later condemns. Individual responsibility and shared conditions belong together. Understanding the aggregate more fully makes responsibility more exact and less self-righteous.

The same care belongs in spiritual study. A cherished teaching can be received through a wish to belong, a fear of uncertainty or a desire to seem advanced. Professor Iyer warns that a partisan perspective can obscure the wider human inheritance. We can therefore study our responses to ideas alongside the ideas themselves. What evidence have we considered? Whose experience have we overlooked? Can we retain reverence while allowing a mistaken interpretation to be corrected? In such inquiry, the receiving mind becomes a more trustworthy instrument.

Skandhas give us a language for a personality that is conditioned, consequential and capable of cultivation. We can observe its combinations without reducing the whole person to them. We can value what is generous, loosen what is harmful and keep returning to the deeper purpose of self-study. The bundle of tendencies becomes a garden entrusted to our care. Each patient correction, each truthful word and each seed of compassion helps make that garden more hospitable to the lives that meet our own.

Glossary

Absolute — The unconditioned Reality, beyond the limitations and distinctions of manifested existence.

Archetype — An ideal pattern or prototype contemplated as prior to its particular expressions; archetypal means pertaining to such patterns.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or faculty of intuitive discernment; Buddhic means pertaining to it.

Deus ex machina — Latin for god from the machine; used figuratively in the quotation for karma working through successive personalities, without implying an arbitrary intervention.

Devachan — The subjective state of spiritual rest and ideal fulfilment between earthly lives. Devachanic means pertaining to it; a *Devachanee* is a being experiencing that state.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include more relationships, consequences and the needs of others.

Ego — In the cited higher usage, the enduring spiritual individuality; distinguish it from the changing personality and ordinary vanity.

Esoteric — Pertaining to an inward or occult interpretation of a teaching, distinguished from its outward formulation.

Exoteric — Pertaining to the outward or public form of a doctrine, symbol or religious account.

Human Solidarity — The shared dignity and interdependence of human beings, expressed through responsibility for one another's welfare.

Ideation — The activity of thought or the expression of ideal patterns; Divine Ideation concerns cosmic intelligence in the cited teaching.

Incarnation — The embodiment of an enduring principle or individuality in a particular life.

Individuality — The enduring spiritual Ego in Theosophical usage, distinguished from the temporary personality of a particular life.

Involution — Involvement or unfolding into conditions of manifestation; the direction and application depend on the cycle or standpoint being discussed.

Jamarana — Decrepitude and death; the ending of embodied life in the quoted account of the dispersal of the aggregates.

Kama-Manas — Mind associated with desire and personal interests; kama-manasic describes thought under that influence.

Karma — The continuity of action, cause and consequence; karmic law gives moral responsibility a wider field of relations.

Karma-Nemesis — Karma considered as the unfailing restoration of moral balance; the compound joins the Sanskrit term to the Greek figure of retributive justice.

Manas — The self-conscious thinking principle; in its higher sense, the reincarnating individuality. Manasic means pertaining to this principle.

Noetic — Pertaining to the higher mind and spiritual cognition, distinguished from merely personal or reactive mental activity.

Occult — Concerned with hidden principles and laws in the Theosophical account; occultism is the related field of inquiry.

Pancha Skandhas — The five aggregates in the exoteric classification; *Pancha Shandhas* is the spelling printed in the quoted Glossary passage.

Personality — The temporary identity, habits and instruments associated with a particular life, distinguished from enduring spiritual individuality.

Prarabdha karma — The karma already bearing fruit in the conditions with which a life begins; distinguished from the present choices made within those conditions.

Psychic — Pertaining to subtle or psychological modes of experience; its level and relation to spiritual intelligence depend upon context.

Reincarnation — The return of the enduring individuality through successive lives within the Theosophical account of evolution.

Round — A circuit of the evolutionary life-wave through the seven globes of a planetary chain in Theosophical cosmology.

Rupa — Form or body; the first of the five aggregates in the quoted Theosophical classifications.

Samkhara / Samskara — Mental formations or tendencies; the Glossary's *sanskara* is described as action, while Professor Iyer uses *samskaras* for persisting tendencies of character.

Sanna / Samjna — An aggregate of perception or recognition in Buddhist terminology; the Key excerpt describes *Sanna* as abstract ideas, while the Glossary prints *sanjna* and describes it as consciousness.

Self-consciousness — The capacity to reflect upon one's own experience, intention and action; the sources distinguish personal and more universal degrees.

Skandhas — Groups or aggregates of attributes that constitute the changing personality and, in the Theosophical account, carry karmic tendencies between lives; *Skandha* and *Skhandas* are singular forms in the sources.

Tanha — Thirst or craving for continued embodied existence; tanhaically means through the attraction or coherence associated with such craving.

Theosophy — Divine wisdom; the spiritual philosophy and discipline of inquiry, self-development and service described in this essay.

Vedana — Feeling or sensation; *vidana* is the form printed and described as perception in the quoted Glossary entry. The two cited classifications differ in terminology.

Vinnana / Vijnana — Consciousness in Buddhist terminology; the Key excerpt describes *Vinnana* as mental powers, while the Glossary prints *vidyana* and describes it as knowledge.

Volition — The faculty or act of willing; the passages consider its relation to spiritual freedom.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy*, pp. 209–210.

“Skandhas. The attributes of every personality, which after death form the basis, so to say, for a new Karmic reincarnation. They are five in the popular or exoteric system of the Buddhists: i.e., Rupa, form or body, which leaves behind it its magnetic atoms and occult affinities; Vedana, sensations, which do likewise; Sanna, or abstract ideas, which are the creative powers at work from one incarnation to another; Samkhara, tendencies of mind; and Vinnana, mental powers.”

Meditation thought: Observe one recurring response without making it the definition of your whole being. What conditions nourish it, and what wiser response could begin to alter those conditions?

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 304, “Skandha or Skhanda”.

“Skandha or Skhanda (Sk.). Lit., ‘bundles’, or groups of attributes; everything finite, inapplicable to the eternal and the absolute. There are five — esoterically, seven — attributes in every human living being, which are known as the Pancha Shandhas.”

Meditation thought: A bundle can be examined strand by strand. Let one familiar attitude become an object of patient inquiry, while remembering the deeper life that no collection of attributes can contain.

3. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 304, “Skandha or Skhanda”.

“These are (1) form, *rûpa*; (2) perception, *vidâna*; (3) consciousness, *sanjnâ*; (4) action, *sanskâra*; (5) knowledge, *vidyâna*. These unite at the birth of man and constitute his personality. After the maturity of these *Skandhas*, they begin to separate and weaken, and this is followed by *jarâmarana*, or decrepitude and death.”

Meditation thought: The personality gathers powers that eventually disperse. Consider what this impermanence asks of your care for the present life and of your attachment to its passing descriptions.

4. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 76.

“The successive appearances upon the earth, or 'descents into generation,' of the tanhaically coherent parts (*Skandhas*) of a certain being, are a succession of personalities. In each birth the PERSONALITY differs from that of a previous or next succeeding birth. Karma, the *DEUS EX MACHINA*, masks (or shall we say reflects?) itself now in the personality of a sage, again as an artisan, and so on throughout the string of births.”

Meditation thought: Circumstances and roles change across the teaching's long horizon. What quality of conduct would remain worthy whether you occupied a position of influence or worked without recognition?

5. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 86.

“ENQUIRER. I begin to understand better now. It is the Spirit, so to say, of those *Skandhas* which are the most ennobling, which, attaching themselves to the incarnating Ego, survive, and are added to the stock of its angelic experiences. And it is the attributes connected with the material *Skandhas*, with selfish and personal motives, which, disappearing from the field of action between two incarnations, reappear at the subsequent incarnation as Karmic results to be atoned for; and therefore the Spirit will not leave *Devachan*. Is it so? THEOSOPHIST. Very nearly so. If you add to this that the law of retribution, or Karma, rewarding the highest and most spiritual in *Devachan*, never fails to reward them again on earth by giving them a further development, and furnishing the Ego with a body fitted for it, then you will be quite correct.”

Meditation thought: Ask what can be spiritually assimilated from today's experience. A generous motive becomes more fruitful when it finds expression in an action that can be understood, repeated and deepened.

6. H.P. Blavatsky — *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. II, p. 241.

“It is the latter, the metaphysical personations of the ‘deeds’ of man, whether good or bad, which, after the death of his body, incarnate themselves, so to say, and form their many invisible but never-dying compounds into a new body, or rather into an ethereal being, the double of what man was morally.”

Meditation thought: An action continues through the tendencies it strengthens. Before a habitual response gains momentum, consider the kind of inward companionship you are preparing for the future.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Noetic Self-Determination”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 272.

“Through this noetic capacity to question the association and the succession of events, one can decisively alter patterns. One can thus move from an initial level of passivity to a degree of free will whilst, in the act of seeing connections and making correlations, raising questions and altering patterns. Given the Buddhist doctrine of *skandhas*, or the Hindu doctrine of *samskaras*, each personality collects, over a lifetime, persisting associated tendencies. These persisting tendencies of thought and character are reinforced by appropriate emotions, desires and habits. Hence, the mere making of sporadic alterations in the inherited pattern of tendencies will be a poor example of free will, since over a longer period of time the pattern itself is conditioned by certain basic assumptions.”

Meditation thought: Look beneath a repeated reaction to the assumption that organizes it. A freer choice may begin when that assumption becomes visible and can be examined without haste.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Noetic Self-Determination”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 272.

“To take a simple example, as long as the will to live is strong and persistent, there is a sense in which free will is illusory. One lacks the fundamental capacity to make significant changes in one's *skandhas* or personality. This is an expression of *prarabdha* karma, the karma with which one has begun life. It is already reflected in one's particular body, one's mind, one's emotions, character and personality — and, indeed, in one's established relationship to a specific heredity and environment. This is part of the karma one cannot alter easily from within.”

Meditation thought: Some conditions are difficult to change quickly. Within them, identify one available responsibility and meet it steadily, allowing perseverance to enlarge the field of effective choice.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Noetic Self-Determination”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 271.

“Put another way, the inherent power of Manasic 'I-am-I' consciousness transcends all patterns such as those which inhere in the volatile *skandhas*. The human being can consciously transcend all behaviour patterns. He can readily transform anything through tapping his inherent powers of volition and ideation.”

Meditation thought: The power to observe a pattern need not remain captive to it. Give a worthy alternative clear thought, then strengthen it through a specific act that can be repeated.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Light, Love and Hope”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 407.

“Instead, this aggregate of the *skandhas* represents one's karmic share in the collective accumulations of tendencies of all humanity. All human beings, one might say, have contributed to the growing of weeds, and every human being has got his or her share of the world's weeds to take in hand and to cut down. At the same time, every human being has got to find and sow the seeds of wisdom and compassion. This can be done only through cultivating patience and the power of waiting, rooted in the willingness to work with the cycles of Nature.”

Meditation thought: We share both the work of clearing harmful tendencies and the possibility of sowing better ones. Tend your portion with patience, remembering the many lives affected by its growth.

11. R.N. Iyer — “The Inheritance of Humanity”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, pp. 71–72.

“In this way, in time, the mind may become free of the partisan perspective of individual *skandhas* and locus in space and time — taking a wider, deeper, and nobler view of the human inheritance than any extant in the modern world; grasping through a study of likes and dislikes the reasons for the hold of a particular and complex set of *skandhas* over man's kama-manasic rationalizations; appreciating and accepting the relentless course of the workings of Karma-Nemesis in the lives of individuals, races, and nations; developing patience with the limitations of ourselves and of others, and finding a detachment from the delusions of cultural egotism everywhere that can only come from a cyclical (rather than a unilinear) view of historical evolution; seeing the continuity in recorded history as a mirroring of the continuity of individual and collective action on the plane of conflict among personalities with their rival but short-sighted notions of want, need, and interest; recognizing that the facts of recorded history are effects in relation to the crucial causal chains generated in prehistory during the earlier Races; regarding the episodic experiences of partial collectivities in history as the cruder shadowings of archetypal patterns of cosmic involution and human evolution depicted in primordial myths and legends, and recorded in the secret history of occult tribulations in antiquity; and, finally, studying our own psychological make-up and the development of earlier Races in the present and earlier Rounds.”

Meditation thought: Allow a wider view of the human inheritance to soften cultural self-importance. Can understanding a recurring preference make your judgment of another person more patient and less automatic?

12. R.N. Iyer — “Insight and Energy”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 174.

“In order progressively to dissipate and dissolve the elements by which, through the desire for consolidation, people limit and bind themselves, the persisting root of illusion must be sought in the mind. The mental image of oneself as separate from other human beings, feverishly moving places but periodically depressed if not ascending all the time, is entirely false. Each human being is merely one of myriads of centres of sensation and observation, but while such centres in the lower kingdoms have a certain precision, humans are all too often lazily and inefficiently trying to observe and record on the basis of mayavic conceptions amidst a kind of day-dreamy existence. It is an important and difficult task to cut through this veil of illusion, and this can only be done by coming down from the cosmic to the mundane. First, one must rise upwards to a cosmic perspective and perceive the whole universe from a unitary standpoint. Then one can come down to oneself and one's daily orbit of duties and obligations. Human beings are assuming an impossible task when they attempt the opposite, starting with the lower self and then trying to dispel their root illusions. Only by ascending to the universal and then descending to the particular can one find greater meaning in every atom and every aspect of oneself, as well as every event upon life's journey and the soul's pilgrimage.”

Meditation thought: Begin with the kinship of life, then return to the next duty. What becomes clearer about this particular responsibility when the person facing it is remembered as one centre among many?