

The Five Skandhas

An Excerpt from The Tibetan Book of the Dead, Freemantle trans.

The evolution of the ego-centered state of being is analyzed in the system of the five skandhas. *Skandha* is literally heap or group, but its meaning may be better conveyed by “psychological component.”

The first component is form (*rūpa*), the beginning of individuality and separate existence, and the division of experience into subject and object. Now there is a primitive “self” aware of an external world. As soon as this happens, the self reacts to its surroundings: this is the second stage, feeling (*vedanā*). It is not yet fully developed emotion—just an instinctive liking, dislike, or indifference, but immediately it grows more complicated as the centralized entity asserts itself by reacting not only passively but actively. This is the third stage, perception (*saṃjñā*), in its fullest sense, when the self is aware of stimulus and automatically responds to it. The fourth component is concept (*saṃskāra*), covering the intellectual and emotional activity of interpretation which follows perception. It is what puts things together, and builds up patterns of personality and karma. Finally there is consciousness (*viññāna*) which combines the sense-perceptions and the mind. The self has now become a complete universe of its own; instead of directly perceiving the world as it really is, it projects its own images all around it.

The fundamental teaching of this book is the recognition of one’s own projections and the dissolution of the sense of self in the light of reality. As soon as this is done, these five psychological components of the confused or unenlightened state of mind become instead factors of enlightenment. They are transmuted into their transcendent or purified forms, which are presented during the first five days in the bardo of *dharmatā*.