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The five aggregates in Asvaghosa's Buddhacarita

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Abstract

Asvaghosa was a Sanskrit poet and propagator of Buddhism. In the agreement of almost all the eminent scholars, Asvaghosa who was believed to born in Ayodhya and was a contemporary of King Kanishka (circa – A.D 78-150). *Buddhacarita* is the most important and influential text written by Asvaghosa. It depicts the life history of Gautama Buddha in twenty-eight sargas. It was written in accordance with the dictum of Buddha with a view to attract people to its principles and thereby ensure their good and well-being. On analysing the various philosophical doctrines in *Buddhacarita* primary emphasise should be given to the basic tenets of Buddha. The present paper explores the idea that the Five Aggregates which are the basic tenets of Buddhism as presented in the *Buddhacarita*.

Keyword: Asvaghosa, *Buddhacarita*, rupa skandhas, vedana skandhas, samjna skandhas, samskara skandhas, vijñana skandhas

Introduction

Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita* is the oldest epic poem found in the kavya school of Sanskrit poetry. Through *Buddhacarita*, he tried to establish the superiority of Lord Buddha and preached the Buddhist philosophy. The concept of the five aggregates (skandhas) is a fundamental aspect of Buddhist philosophy.

Buddha sums up the living beings and the universe that they know in to five factors. These five factors are called panca skandhas in Buddhism. They are

1. Rupa skandhas/ matter or body
2. Vedana skandhas/sensation or feelings
3. Samjna skandhas/perception of sense objects
4. Samskara skandhas/mental formation
5. Vijñana skandhas/awareness or consciousness

Each of these skandhas have numerous sects related to it. Thus, they are called as skandhas which means group.

“The real nature of the world and be not grieved. For this world is an aggregation and there for impermanent because its state is compound”^[i].

The components of existence are called skandhas. Buddha includes all the physical and mental phenomena in these five skandhas. Men who are ignorant believe that it is their personality. It does not generate an essence which can exist on its own or in a group. Still there exists nothing which is distinct from this.

‘Everything that is brought into existence is a combination of elements and is temporary. It relies on external support and lacks self-sustainability. Hence, it is impossible for anyone to reach a state of lasting permanence’^[ii].

1) Rupa skandhas

The four mahabhutas or elements and that proceeding from the grasping of that is called rupa^[iii]. Every inert object and their action are Included in this. Everything sensed by eyes, ears, nose, skin and tongue are elements and these elements and their functions are included in rupa Skandha. The rupa Skandha is composed of four basic elements-earth, water, fire and wind. The sky is not considered as an element since it doesn't have a form and an organization of elements. Five senses and the sensations experienced by them namely form, taste, smell, touch and sound are included in rupa skandha.

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Asvaghosa describes rupa Skandha in Buddhacarita

The birth and consumption of rupa is with the senses ^[iv]. For the growth of dharma, the rise and fall of this is necessary. Clear knowledge about this provides clear knowledge about the body ^[v]. When the body and the senses are subject to death and decay there is no relevance to the idea of 'I' or 'mine' ^[vi]. There is no relevance for the Ideas of body and senses. This body which is made out of bone, flesh, blood and skin is polluted. When we understand this, we won't be excited in it ^[vii].

2) Vedana skandha

Vedana is generated with the sensory experience of an object. 'Vid' means to know. When there is a contact between the senses and its objects, the effect primarily produced is called Vedana. These sensations can be either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Vedana is described thus in *Buddhacarita*. Sensual passions are woeful. Passion is generated from a cause. He who understands this curbs sloth.

वेदनाः सन्ति दुःखानि तत्तत्कारणसम्भवाः।

इति पश्यति यः सोऽसौ सुखसंज्ञां जयत्युत॥ ^[viii]

3) Samjna skanda /perception

Samjna skandha is closely related to vedana skanda. The ideas that arise in the mind as a reflection of the six sensations of vedana are called samjna. Every sense generates perceptions related to its object. The mental concepts formed through the experience of the senses as different from its physical form are called Samjna skandha.

Asvaghosa criticises this in the 16th canto of *Buddhacarita*. The coming together of the six senses and their objects produce consciousness. From this arise perceptions. Of this three has contact, and by that works consciousness, will, and action ^[ix]. How the coming together of sunstone, sun, and fuel produces fire, a person's actions arise out of his intellect, sensory object, and senses ^[x]. From the seed sprouts the shoot, but seed and shoot are not the same. Still, if one doesn't exist, the other also doesn't exist. Such a dependence exists between body, senses and consciousness ^[xi].

In the 17th Canto, he describes thus. He understood the plenty of perceptions which is dependent on form and the responses to it. He became aware of the form and its harm. Thus, he renounced the desire for forms ^[xii].

4) Samskara skandha

The fourth skandha, samskara is very prominent. The factors of three former skandhas can be found in this too. Samskara means 'mental activities.' Touch the contact of senses, and the objects, the sensation aroused as a result of contact—all these are Samskaras. When ideas are brought together to form a thought, it is samskara. It is called "Chetana" in Buddhism. The thought process which analyzes this thoroughly is called samskara. Memory, enthusiasm thought, mediation, words, actions awareness, vigour and pleasure—all these mental activities come under this. Everything except the sky and Nirvana are perceived as samskara in Buddhism.

Asvaghosa mentions this in Buddhacarita

'In the pursuit of the ultimate good, there are four domains of action: the physical, sensations, the mental, and the absence of self. Pleasure loses its grip on those who realize that sensations are rooted in suffering, each stemming from its unique causes.

For those who, with a serene mind, observe the continual cycle of birth, existence, and decay of mental elements (dharma), the tendency to hold onto incorrect beliefs (graha) is permanently discarded' ^[xiii].

5) Vijnana Skandha

Vijnana skandha is the fifth skandha. Vijnana, which is called 'chetana' in samskaraskandha, is the exposition and expansion of the working of the mind. Vijnana has many components in accordance with the fluctuation of conscious actions both good and bad. Buddhism evaluates the good and evil deeds earned by each person in each birth as the essence of vijnana. This results in the cycle of rebirths. Thus, vijnana emerges and vanishes corresponding to our karmas. The relationship between vijnana and samskara is exact. Its importance is evident in the causal theory in Buddhism. Other skandhas can't function on their own. So, if there is no vijnana other skandhas can't emerge. From sensation and perception all are working of vijnana.

Asvaghosa in *Buddhacarita* says 'wrong vision' blinds the eyes. Right vision liberates it. The world, which is entrapped in the idea of 'self' is blinded to truth ^[xiv]. The delusion about 'self' makes a man proud. When a man realises that there is no 'self' he is liberated from all the ties ^[xv]. When one realizes that there is no self, he attains the ultimate nirvana ^[xvi].

Conclusion

In short, these five skandhas are different mental states. The Buddha taught that clinging to these aggregates as if they were a permanent, unchanging self leads to suffering (dukkha). The realization of the impermanence and interdependence of these aggregates is crucial for attaining liberation (nirvana) in Buddhist philosophy.

In the "*Buddhacarita*," these aggregates may be implicitly or explicitly mentioned as part of the broader teachings on the nature of existence and the path to enlightenment.

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ⁱ Buddhacaritam 24/12

ⁱⁱ Ibid 24/16

ⁱⁱⁱ Dhammasangani, PP124-179

^{iv} Buddhacaritam 26/72

^v Ibid 26/73

^{vi} Ibid 26/74

^{vii} Ibid 26/26

^{viii} Ibid 24/28

^{ix} Ibid 16/91

^x Ibid 16/92

^{xi} Ibid 16/93

^{xii} Ibid 17/34

^{xiii} Ibid 24/24,26,27

^{xiv} Ibid 16/79

^{xv} Ibid 16/78

^{xvi} Ibid 16/77