



The Five Skandhas - Form

When Shunryo Suzuki welcomed the hippies who found him in San Francisco, he offered them two things: zazen as in shikantaza (just sitting), and The Heart Sutra (as a chant, in Japanese). There are multiple translations but it opens by saying that Avalokiteshvara, the embodiment of compassion, when practicing deeply, realised that all five skandhas are empty.

Empty/emptiness? It is one of those puzzling words in translation, and Flint had much to say on that when he spoke to us last year.

For today though, my take on the word 'emptiness' comes from IT. People talk about a binary choice; a choice between yes and no, true or false, on or off etc. In IT each digital BIT can be set to 0 or 1, to represent a binary choice. But there is another state, NUL or not-set or Empty. When your pc, laptop, phone etc is turned off, all the bits in it are NUL, it is empty, until you boot it. Booting it, involves a gazillion bits being set to **off** or to **on** in a structure that gives you a functioning device. Even when booted though, your device has large quantities of memory that remains **NUL**, into which you deploy your apps. It is also true of course, the although there are multiple instances of your device, when they are booted, each one is unique.

The Heart Sutra says something analogous this. Reality, the form of the material universe, has no shape or characteristics until you boot it, with your life-time — but the shape that it appears to have is never sustained. In short, the default condition of reality is empty, is nul, is nothingness.

What The Heart Sutra embraces is an account of the three buddhist biggies, impermanence, not-self, and suffering — anicca, anatta, dukkha.

1. **Everything changes** — from moment to moment nothing remains the same.
2. **Everything is connected to everything else** — there is no separate individual existence of anything
3. **Disappointment is inevitable** — and if you don't get the first two points, suffering follows

When it comes to understanding this, The Heart Sutra points to Buddhism's reverse engineering of how we come to boot our version of reality on the back of emptiness. There is a five-fold listing under the headings of the five skandhas.

1. **Form (rūpa)** The material realm, including your physical body — the domain of the four elements (Earth, Water, Fire and Air) and apprehended by the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind.
2. **Feeling (vedanā)** The sensations you experience in your body, including all pain and pleasure.
3. **Perception (samjñā)** You have sense organs, and each of them has objects. Put them together—eye and light, nose and smell, etc.—and you have perception.
4. **Mental formations (samskāras)** All your concepts and thoughts, from the most mundane to the most grandiose.
5. **Consciousness (vijñāna)** Simply put, this is your awareness of skandhas 1 through 4

Here I am taking a look at Form, and trying to foster an experience of its emptiness and impermanence in some thought experiments. I don't think there is much to be gained by inspecting this subject philosophically, because it is a huge and complicated subject once you get into words. It also the case that you can't really take just one of the skandhas and address it on its own. They came as a piece. What follows is an emphasis on Form, not an exclusive interview with it.

I have a handful of exercises:

- Newton's Apple
- The Lost Table

- Painting by numbers
- Berkeley's courtyard
- The Halloumi Mirror

Newton's Apple

Why does the Apple drop? It's a trick question, with Gravity the obvious answer but ...

Where is this gravity? You cannot see, smell, taste, hear or touch it. The word gravity is just a neat way of referring to the phenomenon of falling, without saying what it actually is. We say, after Newton, that any two objects with mass are attracted to each other with a force proportional to the product of their masses, and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them. Well some people say that when they can remember it.

A more traditional view, and the one that prevails in both Buddhist literature and in the Bible, is that the apple falls because of its place in the scheme of the four elements, earth, water, air and fire. The material nature of an apple is predominantly that of earth. It is impelled by its nature to move as close as it can to its place in the elemental hierarchy. Accordingly when I set it free, it moves as quickly as it can towards earth, which is the element at the centre of the universe. Earth is the core element about which all the other elements are nested in their respective layers.

This may sound nuts, but it is a perfectly good explanation — unless and until you decide that the earth is no longer at the centre of the universe.

The point is this. We constantly avow the notion of impermanence, but we live as if there is a suite of knowledge and understanding that is true beyond true i.e. permanent. It is a worthwhile exercise to challenge our certainties, our common sense, our fixed permanent beliefs.

What we actually observe are phenomena, and then we invent explanations and attribute causes to what we see/hear/smell/taste/touch. Thus we go beyond the raw evidence of the senses about what is, or is not, materially the case.

The Lost Table

Everybody draw the table. Draw what you actually see, from the place where you are sitting.

When you are done write a very brief description of the table, starting, "This table is..."

If this works, each picture will be different. However, collectively the descriptions will tend to specify rectangularity, and four leggedness. Mostly though the descriptions will not actually accord with what has been drawn.

This is the point. We subscribe to agreements about what things are like in themselves, about their shape but we never actually see them like that, or experience them whole. In fact the rectangular table, with all four visible legs is something we have not, and will never see. Our understanding of the physical shape of the material world is an invented series of conventions. To be sure these conventions seem to be practical and functional, and you have been brought up to believe in them, but that doesn't make them true absolutely.

Amongst arboreal peoples, as in forest dwellers, an instinctive understanding of rectilinear objects and surfaces is undeveloped.

We add shape to the world, through the concurrence of our conventional views; it isn't a given. Take a look at the cubists. Take a look at how Egyptian, or Olmec (Inca) people drew or sculpted people and their world. Didn't they realise how unrealistic their images were?

Painting by Numbers

You each have a red colour swatch. Write down 3 or 4 words or phrases that are evoked by the colour.

Note

a) the similarities in the words/feelings aroused.

Red is potent. Red is romantic love, and its physical passion. Red is violence, anger, aggression, and danger. It is blood, it is fire. It is dramatic and powerful

b) reveal what the oriental/Chinese take is.

In Chinese culture, red symbolises luck, joy, and happiness. It also represents celebration, vitality, and fertility. Red is the traditionally worn by Chinese brides, as it is believed to ward off evil. Red also evokes the summer season and the element of fire that comes with it. It is the national colour and officially represent happiness, beauty, vitality, good luck, success and good fortune.

Yellow — corresponding to earth — symbolises royalty and is reserved for the emperor. The first Emperor of China was known as the Yellow Emperor. China was often referred to as 'Yellow Earth', and its mother river is the Yellow River.

Green — Money and wealth

Green is the colour of wealth, fertility, regeneration, hope, harmony and growth. Green also represents pure and clean.

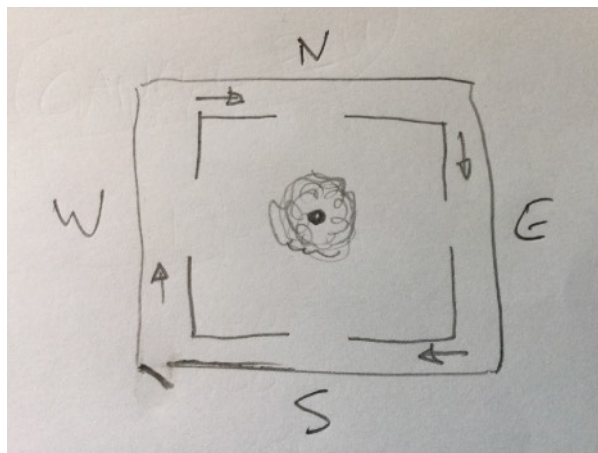
The point is that through colour, and other characteristics like hardness, smell etc. we invest the material world with meaning. We find explanations for that meaning. But in the end, we find that meaning and these explanations are not universal.

We are encouraged to be grateful for the beauty that lies about us, but ultimately beauty does not so much lie in the eye of the beholder as in the thrust of culture. To be thankful for the beauty of the world is also about being thankful for the values of our culture. Contemporary thinking on racism and disability is particularly sensitive on this point. The zen challenge is to recognise the beauty in what is here now — the Japanese repair shop technique call Kintsugi is a reflection of this — look here:

<https://is.gd/rEkKGa>

Berkeley's Courtyard

This is Bishop Berkeley's famous thought game (1685-1753) . Imagine a tree in a courtyard, with a viewing point in the centre of each cloister N E S W. You walk around the cloisters, and from each viewing point you see the tree. But how do you know the tree is still there when you move away from the viewing points?



The point is you have no evidence for the tree's continued existence, apart from the fact that whenever you pass by a viewing point a tree, looking remarkably like the one you saw earlier, is to be seen in the courtyard.

Cutting to the chase, Berkeley concluded that *esse est percipi (aut percipere)* — to be is to be perceived (or to perceive). In short, only what is perceived is real - along with, by extension, those entities that do the perceiving. This is kind of bonkers of course, because it cannot be serious that the tree in the courtyard flickers in and out of existence as we walk kinhin around the cloister. To get round this, Berkeley says that because the tree self-evidently persists, it must be because someone is perceiving it, along with all the other persistent things, and that someone is God.

There is a famous koan attributed to Berkeley, who asked:

“If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?”

Maybe God is on the spot to hear it, but He isn't needed if you allow that birds, squirrels, nettles, slugs and fungi have every bit as much interest in maintaining that which we think of as a tree. ++

Imagining that the tree disappears when you move beyond a viewing point is hard to believe but if, for a moment, you go with that idea ... Well the real miracle would be that the tree re-appears every time you enter a viewing point.

One way or another it is true that the tree depends upon me for its existence; and you could say that my existence is dependent upon the 'reality' of the tree. This nudges towards the notion of co-dependent arising, or Pratītyasamutpāda, which I can't even pronounce but is a pretty central Buddhist teaching.

The Halloumi Mirror

Finally a really difficult exercise. Take a look at yourself in the mirror.

Now imagine that you can separate and remove yourself from the image in the mirror.

What would you see?

An empty space? A Silhouette? A black hole?

Or would you see through to the things behind you in the real world. But hang on there's no way to see through you, because you cannot be in the view on this side of the mirror.

The point is that real world, whatever it is, only comes with you in it. The image in the mirror is as fixed as you are fixed. The real world is a mirror of you and only exists with you. Take you out of the image and the world no longer exists. The image only lasts as long as you last. When you die, the world dies with you — almost.

Reality was empty before you came into the world, and will be empty again after you leave it.

I find this challenging, but when I look the logic suggests:

If me out here, then me in there
if *not* me in there, then *not* me out here

It's another existential dependency mind game.

Some homework.

The homework is simply to try to spot where you are committed to characteristics and causes in the phenomena of form that you experience as fixed, true, permanent, undeniable, impossible to contradict etc.

Look for the simple and everyday stuff. Look for questions. For example:

- Does the sun set?
- How come that house is ugly?
- Does getting very wet in the rain mean you will likely get a cold?
- How come this room needs clearing up?

And next week come and say something about whether or not you found out anything!

Possible refs

“And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out;
The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit,
Can well direct him where to look for it
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;”

John Donne An Anatomie of the World (1611)

Heart of Great Perfect Wisdom Sutra

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva,
when deeply practicing prajna paramita,
clearly saw that all five aggregates (skandhas) are
empty
and thus relieved all suffering.
Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness,
emptiness does not differ from form.
Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself form.
Sensations, perceptions, formations,
and consciousness are also like this.
Shariputra, all dharmas are marked by emptiness;
they neither arise nor cease, are neither defiled nor
pure,
neither increase nor decrease.
Therefore, given emptiness, there is no form,
no sensation, no perception, no formation, no
consciousness;
no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no
mind;
no sight, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no
object of mind;
no realm of sight ... no realm of mind consciousness.
There is neither ignorance

nor extinction of ignorance... neither old age and
death,
nor extinction of old age and death;
no suffering, no cause, no cessation, no path;
no knowledge and no attainment.
With nothing to attain, a bodhisattva
relies on prajna paramita,
and thus the mind is without hindrance.
Without hindrance, there is no fear.
Far beyond all inverted views, one realises nirvana.
All buddhas of past, present, and future
rely on prajna paramita
and thereby attain unsurpassed, complete,
perfect enlightenment.
Therefore, know the prajna paramita
as the great miraculous mantra,
the great bright mantra,
the supreme mantra,
the incomparable mantra,
which removes all suffering and is true, not false.
Therefore we proclaim the prajna paramita mantra,
the mantra that says:
Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha

Dalai Lama translates the mantra as:

“Go, go, go beyond, go thoroughly beyond, and establish yourself in enlightenment.”