



Mindfulness, Meditation, Zen

Nothing More



The Five Skandhas - Feeling (or Sensation)

It is worth a recap on why we are engaging with the five skandhas:

This is Thich Nhat Hanh's translation of the opening of The Heart Sutra.

*Avalokiteshvara
while practicing deeply with
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore,
suddenly discovered that
all of the five Skandhas are equally empty,
and with this realisation
he overcame all Ill-being.*

And the five skandhas are:

1. Form (rūpa)
2. Feeling (vedanā)
3. Perception (samjñā)
4. Mental formations (samskāras)
5. Consciousness (vijñāna)

I tried to make contact with the first skandha, Form, using some thought exercises that challenge our certainty about the structure and nature of the material world.

Skandha two, feeling, sensation, or vedanā, is about our primary contact with whatever the material world is (or is not!). The encounter with sensation is characterised in the familiar sense-organ terms of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching — to which Buddhism adds the less familiar sense-organ of 'mind.'

The thing about sensations is that they arrive, as it were, unfiltered and unnamed. At the outset, sensations are pleasing, displeasing, or neutral. In this, they are the harbingers of greed, hate and delusion. Our instinct is to crave that which is pleasing; to extinguish that which is displeasing; and ignore anything that leaves us unmoved.

The Darwinian take on this would be that this instinct is at the core of evolution by natural selection. Things please because they militate in favour of survival and reproduction and things displease because they threaten survival. There is no point in expending energy in pursuing anything other than both satisfaction or relief. However, we are a long way down the evolutionary path, and our response to sensation is hugely more complicated.

Teachings about practice emphasis experiencing sensation as it is (each moment, life as it is, the only teacher). What do we actually feel when we sit; when we live; when we're peeling carrots? Like snakes in a tube, practice offers an insight into when and where and how we want to move or wriggle. What do we learn? I don't have the capacity to speak to that question in detail! At a general level though, what can be learnt and understood is that sensation is always changing (it's impermanent), and it does not stand for, or call for, an inflexible interpretation/response from something called me. In imposing an evaluation on sensation we invite dissatisfaction and suffering.

A passage from Suzuki Roshi speaks to this point rather more adequately than I can:

"When you suffer, you should suffer. When you feel good, you should feel good." It's the willingness to engage with any set of circumstances, to confront the most difficult aspects of our own selves, that gives us the 'true joy' that is part of a meditative practice.

Do you know this famous koan (see below)? A monk asked a master, *'It is so hot. How is it possible to escape from the heat?'* And the master said, *'Why don't you go to a place where it is neither cold nor hot?'* The disciple said, *'Is there a place where it is neither cold nor hot?'*

The master said, *'When it is cold you should be cold buddha. When it is hot you should be hot buddha.'* You may think that if you practice zazen you will attain a stage where it is neither cold nor hot, where there is no pleasure or suffering. You may ask, *'If we practice zazen is it possible to have that kind of attainment?'* The true teacher will say, *'When you suffer you should suffer. When you feel good you should feel good.'* Sometimes you should be a suffering buddha. Sometimes you should be a crying buddha. And sometimes you should be a very happy buddha.

This happiness is not exactly the same as the happiness that people usually have. There is a little difference, and that little difference is significant. Because buddhas know both sides of reality, they have this kind of composure. They are not disturbed by something bad, or ecstatic about something good. They have a true joy that will always be with them. The basic tone of life remains the same, and in it there are some happy melodies and some sad melodies. That is the feeling an enlightened person may have. It means that when it is hot, or when you are sad, you should be completely involved in being hot or being sad, without caring for happiness. When you are happy you should just enjoy the happiness. We can do this because we are ready for anything. Even though circumstances change suddenly, we don't mind. Today we may be very happy, and the next day we don't know what will happen to us. When we are ready for what will happen tomorrow, then we can enjoy today completely. **You do this not by studying a lecture but through your practice.**

Dogen Zenji, who lived still later, did not get caught up in these word games so much. Rather he emphasised how to get out of word games by fully appreciating things moment after moment. He was more interested in a koan like, *'When it is cold you should be a cold buddha; when it is hot you should be a hot buddha.'* That's all. To be completely involved in what you are doing without thinking about various things is Dogen's way. **This kind of attainment is reached through actual practice, not through words."**

pp 77-8, Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness (Suzuki on the Sandokai)

There's a lot to unpack here. The skandha of sensation is 'empty' because heat is neither hot nor cold. The judgement is extra. It is the same with saltiness, scent, harmony, colour, shape and more.

As for homework for next week: Call it spot the Buddhas in you. Introduce them to us next time.

The Blue Cliff Records, Case 43. *The koan Suzuki refers to.*

A monk said to Tōzan, "Cold and heat descend upon us. How can we avoid them?" Tōzan said, "Why don't you go where there is no cold or heat?" The monk said, "Where is the place where there is no cold or heat?" Tōzan said, "When cold,, let it be so cold that it kills you; when hot, let it be so hot that it kills you."

My fave bit of Suzuki this week.

I think most of us study Buddhism like something already given to us. We think what we should do is preserve the Buddha's teaching, like putting food in the refrigerator. We think that to study Buddhism is to take the food out of the refrigerator. Whenever you want it, it is already there. Instead, Zen students should be interested in how to produce food from the field, from the garden, should put the emphasis on the ground. If you look at the empty garden you won't see anything, but if you take care of the seed it will come up. The joy of Buddhism is the joy of taking care of the garden.

—Shunryu Suzuki-Roshi

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