



Mindfulness, Meditation, Zen

Nothing More



The Five Skandhas - Perception

The recap on why we are engaging with the five skandhas, beginning with 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)

Contact with the first skandha, Form, was made 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 eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin and mind. Sensations are pleasing, displeasing, or neutral. Thus 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.

Third in the skandha list is, Perception (samjñā). This is about the mind joining together the inputs of sensation to make something of the world discovered through sensation. Samjñā is the skandha of colour. It identifies e.g. blue, yellow, red and white — and then allows us to mark-up, as it were, those things that are blue, yellow, red, white etc.

It is far more than this of course. We take note of what we discern in the material world of Form (rūpa), and experience through sensation, and then create discrete images of all that exists and how it functions. These perceptions are embedded in us and, in practically every respect, are inculcated through language and culture. We are directed to understand what the world is through our upbringing. Our education, formal and otherwise, helps us to transition from an infant's beginner's mind into the teenager's expert's mind.

That transition involves a kind of solidification of views about the world and the people and other lives in it. We begin to think that what we think is common-sense. We're given to slipping into the belief that because some common-sense things are universally validated/recognised (e.g. fire is hot and can burn us) everything we hold to be common-sense can be validated.

Surely the sea is blue! Blue is surely one of the most common of all colours. In the mid 19th century (1858), William Gladstone, 20 years before he became PM, published a book on Homer in which he asserted that on the face of it the ancient Greeks had no word for Blue. Homer described the Aegean, for example, as a wine-dark sea. It kicked off a long debate about if and where there was any evidence of ancient recognition of the colour Blue. Gladstone tended to the view that in antiquity people were colour blind, and it had required a couple of thousand years of a 'progressive education' of the eye for our current appreciation of colour to arise. The publication of Darwin's Origin of Species (1859) a year after Gladstone published, likely lent weight to this view. Analysis of other ancient languages from Hindu texts to Nordic myths also lack a colour word for Blue.

Anyway, cutting to the chase, it is by no means clear that even a perception like that of the colour Blue cannot be considered universal, settled, unambiguous, common sense, quality of

the world. Perception is something that arises in the mind rather than in the sensations of form experienced by the sense organs. We make our perceptual world, including the tree in the middle of the courtyard that appears and disappears as we walk around the cloister.

If this seems in one respect pretty obvious, and in another rather abstract, it is I think worth noting that this notion of perception feeds into contemporary psychology, wellness (horrible word) and therapy. Back in ancient Greece again (50-135 AD) the Stoic teacher Epictetus has often been quoted as saying, *"It's not the events that upset us, but our judgements about the events."* For judgements you can read perceptions.

We get stuck with our perceptions of phenomena, events, and outcomes. Our perceptions become hard-wired, fixed, and solidified. But they are, in truth, a kind of painting scheme that we have adopted both communally and personally. Of this three things are true. Firstly the colour scheme can be changed. Secondly other people can have quite different schemes. Thirdly, when we die, our perceptions die with us — we may leave a lingering echo of them in our children, but if we do, we're not even going to know that.

And how does this feed into psychology, wellness and therapy. Well, my understanding is that the most commonly available therapy right now is CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy); and that CBT is precisely based on re-framing events with new judgements that reduce the pain/stress/misery of the first-made judgements — in the thought of Epictetus 2000 years ago, and Avalokiteshvara a millennium before that.

Perception is empty of permanence — of certainty and persistence. And it can help enormously in harmonious relationships with other to clock this.

Avalokiteshvara slightly over-eggs the pudding in admonishing Shariputra, but why wouldn't one state the case very forcefully.

*"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; "*

If we fix our perceptions; if we give way to expertise; we overestimate our subjective independence, and limit our capacity for compassion.

When it comes to homework for next week, the question is this:

Where and when have you run into your 'perception barrier,' and realised that your prior 'knowledge' might compromise your ability to think and act compassionately (whether towards yourself, other people, or other beings)? This is tougher than it looks because it invites you to see yourself in the act of seeing. *The little old woman I helped by reaching the biscuits she wanted from the top shelf in the supermarket aisle was smelly. Discuss!*

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