



## Mindfulness, Meditation, Zen

# Nothing More



### The Five Skandhas - Mental Formations

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)

An engagement with the first skandha, Form, was offered through some thought exercises that challenge our certainty about the structure and nature of the material world. As Tom summed it up, the material world is conventioned and by no means has the conceptual solidity we imagine it to have.

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. There is no one-to-one of sensation to response.

Skandha three is Perception (samjñā). This is about the mind processing the inputs of sensation into the objects of the world that are dis-covered through sensation. So, for example, 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. The sensation that arises in the eye is perceived, or objectified as light, and the light is distinguished as colour in Form. The outcomes of perception are manifestly culturally, historically and contextually determined

Now we are at four, Mental Formations (samskāras). This is the assembly zone in which the aggregates of Form, Feeling, and Perception are pulled together into a coherent stories about the world and the entities and beings that exist within it. In essence we quietly defy the impermanence (anicca) that may readily be discovered in the first three skandhas, and generate the dualistic world which comprises 'ordinary reality.' The samskāras comprise an aggregate of self and others, with all our characteristics and the history that made us. Here we create the notion of a persistent, separable self. We curate, or is it nail down, selections we have made in respect of form, feeling and sensation, to establish who and what we are, whilst conveniently ignoring the truth that our selections have no sustainable substance, including our notion of self. The notion of no-self, or anatta, is central to Buddhist understanding.

The notion of no-self, of anatta, is powerfully difficult to grasp for it flies in the face of our own culture's passionate commitment to individual identity and rights. Anatta is perhaps less challenging in the more communitarian cultures of Asia and the Orient. The point though is not to dismiss the notion of self but rather to emphasis that there is nothing permanent or immutable about self. Each moment is new, and we are new in each moment.

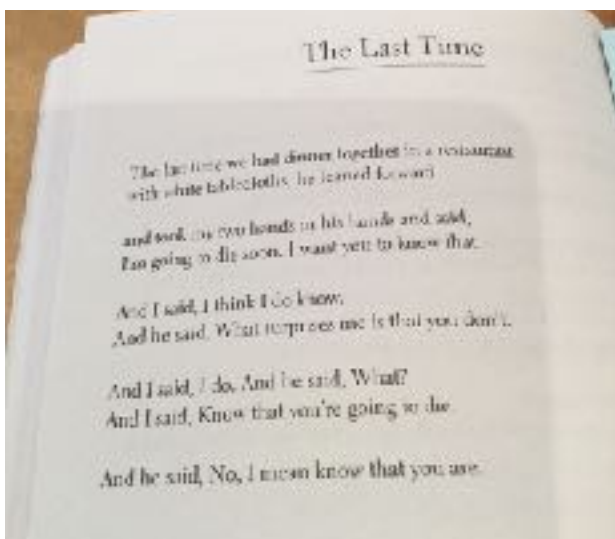
Within the skandha of Mental Formations, we nonetheless construct elaborate notions about our experiences, our history, and who and what we are. We make the same assessment of all other beings, and of the world both animate and inanimate. We become attached to these Mental Formations, and as we allow them to assume the attributes of permanence, they begin,

as it were, to own us rather than the other way round. There is much talk of liberation in our practice. It is liberation from our mental formations that is first and foremost being spoken of. This point is especially well-made in the Five Contemplations by Thich Nhat Hanh, which are said before meals as a grace. The practice of reciting these contemplations before eating is a way to foster mindful eating, and helps to promote inner peace through food.

- *This food is a gift from the earth, the sky, the universe, numerous living beings and much hard work.*
- *May we eat with mindfulness and gratitude so as to be worthy to receive it.*
- *May we transform our unwholesome mental formations, especially our greed, and learn to eat with moderation.*
- *May we keep our compassion alive by eating in such a way that we reduce the suffering of all beings, preserve our planet and reverse the process of global warming.*
- *We accept this food so we can nurture our brotherhood and sisterhood, strengthen our community, and nourish our ideal of serving all beings.*

I would like to make a more sombre point by doing what is actually a classic Buddhist exercise, squaring up to the reality your own certain death. Marie Howe lays it on the line in her poem The Last Time:

The exercise is to imagine your own funeral.



- \* Who would be there?
- \* Where would it be?
- \* What kind of event is it?
- \* Who speaks?
- \* Will there be cucumber sandwiches after?
- \* What about the family dynamics?
- \* Which pictures of you would they choose for the Order of Service?
- \* Who would do the eulogy, and what might they say?

We'll take a couple of minutes over this.

The point of this exercise is not simply about facing up to your own demise. It is about the

truth that however you conceive this event, with all the deeply complex and personal understanding of the people and forms that it comes with, none of this will ever be real for you nor, by definition, could it be. All Mental Formations expire in this way, and more to the point they die over and over with each passing moment because, as Suzuki Roshi so famously said, "Everything changes."

You, and everyone and everything are in a state of evolution, and the challenge in compassion is to recognise this and be able thereby to respond to circumstances as they are, rather than as you would have them be.

Great is the matter of birth and death. All is impermanent quickly changing. Awake, awake. Do not waste this life.

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

Pick an event of a kind that is familiar to you e.g. birthday party, conference, wedding, cycle race etc. and conjure it in mind. Then sit with it for a time, and try to spot how many complex judgements you form about the goals, the people and the activities that comprise the event.

**Buddha's last words — "All formations are impermanent. Practice zealously!" (appamādena sampādeṭha)**