



# Mindfulness, Meditation, Zen

## Nothing More



### The Five Skandhas - Consciousness

Here is a 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)

One of the Zen's conceits (and of Buddhism generally) is that in comparison with other spiritual traditions, it is non-intellectual. The teaching on the skandhas, and on consciousness in particular, would rapidly dissuade even the casual observer from this notion. The aim of what I have been offering is to crack open a door into the room where all this thinking is to be found. The official entry point though remains zazen, shikantaza, just sitting, experience. It is in sitting that consciousness is most powerfully discovered.

How do we get there?

#### From the Foam Sutta

Material form is like a lump of foam,  
and feeling is like a bubble;  
perception is like a mirage,  
and the constructing activities are like a banana tree [lacking a core, peeling like an onion];  
consciousness is like a [magician's] illusion.

*Trans Peter Harvey. An Introduction to Buddhism. Cambridge University Press.*

*See also: [Commentary on the Phena \(Foam\) Sutta](#)*

Form is conventioned and does not have the conceptual solidity we imagine it to have. Sensation (feeling) arises at the point when we real-ise a material boundary that separates what appears to be a me-thing from everything else (which is sometimes pleasing, and sometimes not). Perception gives names to sensation, and disaggregates it into the six objects of the senses; a development largely driven by parental language and culture. From this shifting sensual and cognitive ground we create mental formations which, in their rising and falling, offer stories about what is, and what is happening - much of which is in churn, and constantly changing. And then comes consciousness. This is 'consciousness of', not consciousness as a capacity of thought. In phenomenology, 'consciousness of', is referred to as intentionality.

In consciousness we find the 'products' of the first four skandhas being assembled into an entity which comprises a narrative of Self and the world that Self lives in. The catch is obvious. This *entity* is built from 'materials' that have no fixed, permanent, or separate being. In this sense therefore the Self of consciousness is also ephemeral, does not persist, dies as it is born. Anicca — impermanence — gives way to Anatta — not-Self.

This is a hard nut to crack. I know that I exist. Sal will tell you that I exist. Surely I drive my car. Surely I am father of my children (I certainly hope so). Surely I am British. Isn't it me who sits on my cushion every day? What the teaching (seems) to be about is that I will pass, and it will transpire that truly my separation from the whole was never really a separation. "Dust to dust,

*ashes to ashes,*" and all that. This doesn't mean that I don't exist; rather that my existence is transitory and that whatever idea I have of my I-ness is quintessentially a kind of illusion. Back on planet Earth the practical implications, the implications for my experience and actions, arise because Consciousness is also the skandha in which morality and ethics arise. Consciousness comprises the space in which we decide what is right and what is wrong. Morality arises because my notion of Self necessarily comes with a set of understandings about what Self is, what Self needs to survive, and therefore (psychopaths notwithstanding) what other Selves need. It is a crude moral metric but what Selves need to survive, and for maximum comfort in surviving, is right; and what threatens existence and comfort is wrong. In this context, I think rather obviously, is a recipe for disappointment, suffering, dukkha. Self becomes attached to things and to outcomes that it thinks are attainable and right, only to discover that they disappear into the sands of time, and are thwarted from the impact of the 'malformed' Selves of other beings. Worse still Self encounters circumstances in which it is perceived as wrong, and behaving in ways that are contrary to other Selves.

Consciousness makes a film of our lives in which we mostly find ourselves conjuring with the illusion of being the good guys. Consciousness is the cinema magic of our brains. Only occasionally do we glimpse that we may also be the bad guys. It is almost impossibly difficult and rare to see that we are making a film. It is one of the insights that sitting may offer.

We cannot escape this though. Even if we are brilliantly enlightened, we are still going to be stuck in our location, cameras running 24/7 like *"I'm a celebrity."* The point about this understanding, as is the case with so much in our dharma, is that it helps us to find the gap between the events that arise to hit us and the response that we make to them. When that gap is found, it can be bridged rather more skilfully and compassionately than if we just kick off. And better bridging means less dukkha, less suffering, and more metta.

The skandhas lead us, through their account of how we experience reality, towards the gap that helps us cope with it.

I want to offer a couple of pieces that speak to this so much better than I can. One is that most famous speech for Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and the other is from a proper Buddhist source, the Foam Sutta.

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### As You Like It — William Shakespeare

#### Jaques:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. **At first** the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;  
**And then** the whining school-boy, with his  
satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school. **And then** the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. **Then a**  
soldier,  
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the  
pard,  
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in  
quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation

Even in the cannon's mouth. **And then** the  
justice,  
In fair round belly with good capon lined,  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part. **The sixth age** shifts  
Into the lean and slippered pantaloons,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;  
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too  
wide  
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly  
voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. **Last scene of all,**  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans  
everything.

*(sorry it's a bit male!)*

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**You might also look up this Lion's Roar article, which is far more mainstream Buddhist than I have been in these prompts. Here's a quote**

Developing a harmonious friendship with yourself is a central part of the Buddhist path of awakening. Teachings on the five skandhas invite you into a deeper, more intimate experience of yourself. What do you find when you look into your own experience of body and mind? This {exercise} isn't about dogma—the point isn't to confirm that the {skandha} map is accurate or “correct.” Part of the point is to notice that the map is not the territory and never could be. (Imagine a map of Canada that was the size of Canada: how useless would that be?) You are invited to set forth as explorers of your own inner and outer terrains...

On this journey, you see that both clarity and confusion are woven into your everyday experience of mind. The skandhas illuminate a fivefold process of mind grasping and fixating, engaging in a losing battle of ego against the world. Yet the same mental events can be the basis for a cease-fire, an entrance into non-struggle and luminous peace.

Each moment in the unfolding of your experience is an opportunity to welcome yourself, your feelings, your mind, and others in your world. The key to working with mind, to understanding its processes, is found in the innate warmth and friendliness of the mind itself. You don't need a newer, better, super-improved body-mind. The real challenge is making friends with the mind and body you already are.

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**So now to discussion, and Homework for next week.**

I think the summation of the skandhas prompts some pretty big questions. They are the kind of questions we can only address together because of the intimacy and safety of the container that we have made through our connection and practice.

- Is your life satisfactory?
- What will they say of you?
- Who do you admire?
- What use am I?
- Can I help?
- Who should I thank?
- What comes next?
- Who is in charge?

These questions are mini-koans. Each one fishes for the story of a context in your life, where it might make sense for it to be asked. The exercise isn't to answer the question, rather it is to find a narrative, based on your own experience, in which the question might sensibly arise.

*For example, if I iterate through some of the things that I think are good fortune in my life, I might well wonder who I should thank. But more than that ... My narrative here evokes comparison with that of Solzhenitsyn's Ivan Denisovich Shukov, whose 'happy' day in the gulag culminates with a piece of sausage to eat. In some sense my 'gratitude' can easily seem to be nothing more than that I am better off than Shukov. Well I'm not going to work that through other than to say that learning to be thankful in all circumstances is quite a big thing, and it is difficult to believe that I do it!*

Let's discuss this tonight. And for homework, go away and pick a question, or create one of your own, and come back next time to tell us about it.

For my part I need to confess that I've taken a real liberty with the teaching that I have encountered, and I would like next week to speak to that a little.

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

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