

ZEN notes



SOKEI-AN SAYS

HOW THE FIVE SKANDHAS CORRESPOND TO
THE THREE WORLDS

You desire something. Why do you desire it? Because you see something that you think you want to possess. You do not desire to possess the sky because there is nothing there that you can grasp.

Rupa-skandha, the first of the five skandhas, is what can be seen, heard, eaten, worn. These all belong to kamadhatu, the world of desire. Therefore rupa-skandha corresponds to kamadhatu. These days, some countries desire to occupy the sky and the ocean. This is a development of human desire, the desire to possess something that really does not belong to human beings.

Vedana-skandha, sensation or feeling, belongs to rupadhatu. We see something and we perceive feeling, or feel sensations. There are four different types of sensation according to the Kosha-shastra and some other teachings: pleasure, agony, abandonment, and that which is neither pleasure nor agony. "Abandonment" means the feeling of agony and of pleasure, but, at the same time, indifference to these feelings. For example, when an American Indian's arm is cut, there is feeling, but his mind is free from this feeling. When you are at the dentist's to have a tooth pulled, he asks you: "Does it hurt?" And you reply, "Yes, but never mind. Go ahead!"

In Hekigan, there is a story. Ma Taishi was ill. The abbot went into his room and asked: "How do you feel these days, Osho?" Ma Taishi answered: "Sun-faced god, moon-faced god." This is a famous answer. Ma was about to die at this time. The

god who has a sun-face, the god who has a moon-face. This famous koan expresses "abandoned" feeling.

Unmon asked his disciple: "I do not ask you how you lived before you were fifteen, but inform me how you have lived since your fifteenth year?" No disciple answered his question, so Unmon answered himself: "Every day is a fine day." This answer also is from the view of abandonment. You must note what I say very carefully. I am disclosing very important Zen teachings. To handle these koans is the student's work. One is not permitted to speak of them in Japan. "Abandon" in Sanskrit is upeksha-vedana. This kind of explanation is not written in any book, even in the Kosha-shastra.

By vedana, man regulates his action. If it is pleasant, he approaches an object; if it is unpleasant, he runs away from it. It is beautiful, so he tries to get it; it is ugly, so he tries to throw it away. But vedana-by-itself is different from the object that gives you the feeling.

When you eat something sweet, you feel agony or pleasure according to your own condition. Your pain or pleasure is not a tag fastened to the object. It is in your individual feeling. Someone sees the statue before the Plaza Hotel, and he thinks this is a beautiful statue. A woman from Japan, seeing it, would hide her face with a handkerchief and run away (1939). Vedana was adulterated by her thoughts.

Samjna has no objective existence. It includes the abstract and numbers. 1, 2, 3--as numbers--are your ideas, isolated from this one, or this two. Numbers are purely mental and you count them mentally. In Seattle, there was an Indian selling bears' teeth.

Sokei-an's Lives

After my father's death (1897) all his robes were mine. We were quite poor, so to save buying me clothes my mother said: "Wear your father's robes child." Of course not his priest's robes--but his samurai robes of the Sasaki family. My father was a big man, very tall--and I was only fifteen, going on sixteen. But it is customary in Japan--those robes last forever and are handed down.

So, in some park or on some bench, wearing those samurai robes too long for me, some old servant, some feudal servant of another family, recognizing the Sasaki symbol, would in passing salute the robe with its insignia. He would not know me. He would salute the robe, not me!

When I was drafted and went to Manchuria, I was twenty-four years old.

I was in a monastery before I entered the Russo-Japanese war and spent eight months on the battlefield. My teacher had told me, "If you are a true Buddhist, your mind is always peaceful--even on the cliff of life-and-death."

It is characteristic of Buddhism that its followers learn to be detached. At the end of their lives, their attitude is serene. They do not struggle, and they give up everything. Knowing that the end of their days is approaching, they keep themselves in quiet meditation upon that moment when consciousness will come to an end. This is a most remarkable attitude. You may have seen pictures of Jap-

anese or Chinese prisoners standing in a row with joined hands as they are about to have their heads cut off. They have no fear, hatred or mental disturbance on their faces as they calmly await the end. Of course any religious person will take the same attitude. And he who is about to cut off their heads realizes that he is not doing so because of his own desire--he is not their enemy. It has happened quite naturally that they should meet, one playing the part of executioner and the other the part of victim. Knowing that it is a natural circumstance, they are not enemies--they even sympathize with one another. In Japan, the one would say: "Ready, my friend?" "Yes, friend."

The Buddha put great emphasis upon this detachment. It is really the first gateway into Buddhism.

In the battlefield I experienced detachment every morning. Every morning I ate my last breakfast. I gave up all attachment, the dream of a wonderful future. I did not suffer.

The officer gave orders and I obeyed. Even if he ordered something impossible I would reply, "Yes, sir." His orders had no selfish motive and I obeyed impersonally.

When I was in the regiment one midnight when I woke up in the snowy evening, those bodies were deeply sleeping, but their minds were still active and still fighting.

Zen students take refuge in meditation in all circumstances..when we must risk our lives, we start with meditation. And we return to meditation.

In ancient days in my country, warriors came in the morning to meditate in the temple. Then they went to the battlefield, fought bravely, perhaps died. War lords, when their castles were about to fall, seized by the enemy, returned to their meditation seats to meditate upon emptiness.

Meditation is the final decision. Sometimes it is the first step to death. You forget everything in meditation. To us meditation is returning to the bosom of God... If you come back for one moment to meditation it will be like a drop of cool water to a bird.

As a ceremony of human life, the dying moment is of great significance. Confucius said: "When a bird is dying, it cries. It is beautiful. When a man is dying, he speaks. It is beautiful." Observing the dying moment in both bird and man he sees beauty. The great man does this. The small man does not take off his hat even if his friend dies on the battlefield.

When I was in Manchuria, I was on a transportation cart, might be blown up any minute. We were transporting dynamite. There was no time to think much.

We were on a bad road, the mud carved out by the wheels and many strips of ditches where, if the wheel fell in, the wagon would zig-

zag. So we tried to manage the horse to keep the wheel always on the convex part. There were two or three Chinamen on the roadside standing in the carved ditch, and our wagon, passing on the bank, slipped, and the wheel compressed one man's foot. It was badly injured. One of the soldiers jumped off and took care of him--tried to put him in the wagon and take him to the hospital. The man said: "Never mind, never mind, it happened accidentally and no one can be blamed." We begged him to let us take him to the hospital, but he refused. "I had better go home, happier than in a Japanese hospital." I liked his attitude.

In human life, one believes that he has an ego, another that he does not. One soldier will go to the battlefield, thinking: "I am going to fight against the enemy. I hate him!" Another will say, "I am going to fight against the enemy, therefore I must fight." He doesn't want it, he is not the cause of it --but who is the cause of war? No one; a glacier comes from the North..perhaps the temperature of the earth that day is the cause of war. So he says, "I am a soldier born in this period, and I am going to fight, and I will fight as strongly and as bravely as I can. I am not fighting an enemy, but I shall fight." He is non-ego.

I was a monk but according to the law I must go to the battlefield. So I must decide how to behave myself on the battlefield. As a monk, how must I behave? I had to create

a new morality and a new rule of behavior, and I must bear it. For instance in peaceful times you cannot kill anyone with a sword or a gun; but on the battlefield, it seems to me to be permitted to kill as many as you can.

I had a Christian friend; we both went to the battlefield. He was standing sentry outside a little village and suddenly someone appeared very close to him, and he shot and killed him. Then he fell down himself. We carried him to his tent and took his clothes off, thinking he was killed, but he had only fainted. This annoyed him very much for five or six years. He is still living (1938). I hope he has made his peace by this time. He was a good man but not a very good soldier, not concentrated, one-minded.

To have two views about life is not very comfortable. With two views you must close one eye and open the other; it is like winking from beginning to end.

When I was on the battlefield, under the shower of fire, I thought often of this teaching: "My existence is like lightning that flashes through the dark air. My life is so short, but original substance exists timelessly. It is like a dream; when I draw my last breath, I will go back to original emptiness. Why should I be afraid of death?" Then I did not hesitate to walk into the shower of fire. At such times, Buddhism gives great strength, the strength to pass from darkness into light and to return to darkness. But when you take refuge in mind-

lessness, this is even more wonderful than taking refuge in emptiness. We suffer mostly in our minds, almost every moment of every day our mind tortures us.

There is a koan: "If you meet a giant raksha that catches you, flings you around the universe and throws you into hell fire--at that moment how do you observe the commandments?" You will really grasp the true foundation of the commandments through this koan.

I realized it when I joined the army in the Russo-Japanese war. I was marching under the shower of fire; my comrades on the left and right were falling down dead and there was no hope left. It was a piercing moment. How could I observe the commandments at this moment? At such a time, affliction means nothing at all; hatred, anxiety, anger, love, joy--all are meaningless.

If you come to the true foundation of the commandments, the battlefield is a good experience for everyone. To the conscientious one the experience of war is a wonderful teaching; but to the depraved one, the experience of war is nothing.

A newspaperman tried very hard to make me say that Zen is the sect of the Japanese army and navy. I just smiled and said, "I wonder whether the Japanese Army knows about Zen or not!" But I say to my students; "Soldiers have no time to work with complicated philosophy. Zen is their religion."



The purchaser counted them by two's and paid accordingly. The Indian, who was cheated, said "Thank you."

Primitive man's samjna is not matured. Abstract thoughts, like emptiness, are purely samjna. We can conceive the thought, emptiness, but there is nothing that is emptiness in the world. A handkerchief is white, but white is an abstract notion. No object corresponds to it. So samjna corresponds to arupadhatu. It is nothing that can be seen by your eyes or heard with your ears.

Samskara is difficult. In samskara, there are two divisions; one kind of samskara possesses some element of samjna; the other possesses no element of samjna, it is pure mood. In your meditation, you feel your mind is trembling, perhaps. It possesses no thoughts whatsoever--no emptiness, no idea of Nirvana. It is pure, but there is something that is trembling like a gossamer in a spring field. It is called "samskara without possessing any element of samjna."

Samskara and movement of mind are very closely interwoven. Movement is swift, like lightning. You can reach there by training. In all art, the masters perform their art in samskara. For instance, in playing the piano, you use your eye and ear--rupa and vedana, linked with mind. But as you play the piano and at the same time think "How can the rent be paid?" this is the work of samskara. In meditation, when you say, "I feel my consciousness," you are still in samjna. You are not yet in the samskara stage. When you enter the state of consciousness you do not feel anything.

The fire moth comes near to the fire many, many times. Then at last he

jumps into the fire. There is no more existence of the fire moth, nothing to say. When you really enter consciousness itself, there is nothing to speak about, nothing to describe. When you are really in the center of consciousness, you have nothing to say or to describe.

Samskara partly corresponds to the first two stages of arupadhatu. They meet samjna there. In the first two stages of arupadhatu there is nothing but empty sky. You meditate upon the empty sky; you forget your own existence. Then there is nothing but pure time. Time and space are the property of consciousness. You are still in the realm of consciousness, you are not in the center of consciousness itself. Then you forget yourself entirely. This is called "the state of no possession." Everyone thinks this is the center of consciousness, but while you are in the state of "no possession," your state is still abstract. You are still in the state of samskara.

When you come to the center of vijnana you need not bother about emptiness or consciousness. There is nothing to talk about, nothing to think about. You don't meditate to find your house any more. You are in your own house. When you get into consciousness, vijnana itself, you don't need to think about it. It is as when you are looking at something, you don't need to think of your eye. In this state of mind you must come into the Zen room. This corresponds to the final stage of arupadhatu.

Sentient beings are living in all these different stages of aggregation. So we are all the same sentient beings, but our abodes are different.

Some are living in the consciousness that operates in rupa. Some are living in vedana consciousness. Some are in samskara, and some are living in vijnana by itself. When you are aware of awareness, like a Zen student, when you realize your epistemological existence, then you dwell finally in your individuality, for it is finally established. You have your own consciousness and your consciousness operates your action. But when you are not aware of this awareness, you are not yet a human being. You are not awake. Those who reside in final awareness are called the Bodhisattvas who dwell in vijnana.

There are many sentient beings who reside in samskara. Many artists live in that stage, like Sesshu. He used only water and black ink, but with his brush he manifested pine trees, mountains, and waves in their own velocity of motion. We can see the waves really moving. No camera or oil painting can show this movement. Sesshu burned incense, played the koto, and--when the moment of inspiration came--seized his brush. He was certainly dwelling in a different sphere from other artists. He was a famous Zen master.

There are beings living in samjna--philosophers, writers, or emotional artists.

Those who are living in vedana dwell in sensation. Drinking, embracing women, they live only in the world of sensation. And there are those who live only in the world of matter. They know nothing deeper than living in a house, eating, putting on their clothes.

These are only abstract examples. Actually, everyone is living in these five stages at once, in different degrees.

Worldly people know IT in name only. To them, the five skandhas are just five different names. Of course, as Reality, IT is one existence. But, as they are blind, they cannot see IT. Therefore I use different names and explain them. I am not bothered by the names, for I know what IT is. You can call IT Akasha, Emptiness, Dharmakaya, Shunyata, Nirvana. Buddhist scholars study the different meanings of these five words. Those who know what IT is sometimes use Akasha, sometimes Dharmakaya, sometimes Shunyata. It is just as when I write to my family, I call myself Yeita Sasaki; to friends, I am Koji Shigetsu; as a monk, Soshin; as a teacher, Sokei-an. I know him, so names are not bothersome at all.

A COMMENTARY ON THE SIXTH PATRIARCH'S SUTRA: It seems to me these five skandhas are the main column of the Buddha's teaching. If we open the first pages of the Agamas, we find them immediately. I was meditating on them for twelve years, and I understood Zen through contemplation of these five skandhas. In the Agamas, from the first page you will see these five skandhas, and all teachers of the Orient place great emphasis on these five skandhas, and all the disciples practice meditation on the five skandhas.

I have read many translations made by European scholars. None of them speak of the five skandhas. None! Sometimes a reference to it as if it were a negligible thing, but no study.

I translate this as "shadows of the mind; body, senses, thoughts, confectioned mind-elements, and consciousness. (Later confectioned became unconscious motion.)

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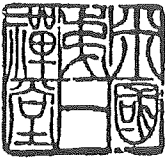
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