



Winter Holidays

The Zen Center will be closed December 22 - January 3, during Dharma Transmission. During this time, Josho Roshi will be giving Dharma Transmission to Kuden Paul Boyle, Jakuko Mo Ferrell, and Zenki Kathleen Batson. This will complete their training as Soto Zen Priests, and is a wonderful occasion to celebrate.

Zoom Zazen will continue over the Holidays, Monday - Friday at 6:00AM and 6:50AM.

In Person Dharma Talks

Tuesday, January 3, 7:45 PM, Kuden Paul Boyle.

Sunday, January 15, 10:30, Josho Pat Phelan.

January 22, 10:30, Zenki Kathleen Batson.

February 19, 10:30, Zenki Kathleen Batson.

All-day Sittings

All-day sittings are scheduled for Sundays, January 15, February 19, and March 19, from 6:00 A.M. until 5:00 P.M. This will be for people who are fully vaccinated, **including a booster**, and who can wear a mask indoors. Orientation will be on **Saturday night at 7:30**, and includes instruction in the meal form. The day will include zazen, a Dharma Talk, *dokusan* and a work period, as well as breakfast and lunch. ***It is alright to sit half of the day, but please sign up in advance, and please speak to Josho Sensei if this is your first all-day sitting.*** The suggested donation is \$15 for members, and \$25 for others; however, if you are inclined to offer more, that would be very helpful in maintaining Zen Center. *Oryoki* sets are available for use by those who do not have their own, and a \$5 donation is appreciated. **Please sign up by Wednesday at info@chzc.org.** For more information on the *oryoki* meal form see: <https://kannondo.org/getting-started/oryoki/>

Celebrating 100 Years of Soto Zen in the US

During five days in November, I was invited, along with about 40 other American priests, to help staff and support a five-day precept retreat for Lay people at Zenshuji Temple in Los Angeles – the first Soto Zen temple in the US. For this ceremony, Westerners were being trained by Japanese priests to take many of the major roles, as part of the transmission of Zen in the West.



I served on the Ryoban which represents the Sangha during many chanting ceremonies on the ordination platform. For the first several days, the ceremonies invite the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to support our intention to be awake and compassionate, to formally open the ordination platform, and to honor deceased founders and Sangha members lay and ordained. The last two days were devoted to renunciation and avowal, receiving the precepts, and formally closing the platform.

It was a moving experience to be with Zen Buddhists from all over the United States, priests and lay people, working together in our shared intention to wake up for the benefit of all beings.

With a deep bow of appreciation,

Josho

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Outdoor Half-day Sitting, Saturday, February 11

On the brisk and invigorating morning of December 17, six adventurous forest bathers sat zazen outdoors under the trees during our last Outdoor Sitting of the year. Our next Outdoor Half-day Sitting will be Saturday, February 11, 6:00 am-12:15 pm. You are welcome to participate for all or any part of this event. Email info@chzc.org for more information or to sign up.

Small Groups

The small groups at the Zen Center came out of Zoom discussions that we had at Practice Intensive teas during the pandemic. People were hungry for that kind of interaction, and wanted to continue it after the Practice Period was over. So we formed small groups of six members maximum where people could get together and informally discuss their practice. Since practice includes all of life, we found ourselves discussing everything. These really act as support groups for people who are trying to live their lives according to Buddhist principles.

We meet once a month, both in person and by Zoom. All members have an equal opportunity to share. We don't try to fix or correct each other, just to sit and listen. It's a wonderful feeling to be heard, and to talk about practice in an informal setting. If you're interested in joining a small group, or would like more information, contact David Guy at davidguy@mindspring.com

Study Groups

6:45 P.M. – 8:00 P.M., on Thursday evenings

Study Group is offered by Zoom. We are reading Jakusho Kwong's new book, *Mind Sky, Zen Teaching on Living and Dying*. Kwong Roshi was a disciple of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, and he is founder of Sonoma Mountain Zen Center. We will resume meeting on **January 5**, on page 77, and this group will meet through January 26. Everyone is welcome.

A new Study Group will begin February 2, on the *Heart Sutra*. We will read Shohaku Okumura's commentary in the book, *Living by Vow*, found on pages 131-205.

The Zoom link is on the Event Calendar section of the CHZC website: www.chzc.org/events.htm. Please log on 5-10 minutes before the study group begins so we can start on time. *All the Study Groups are open to everyone, and there is no charge.*

Sangha Net

The Sangha Net is a network of volunteers who can offer short-term assistance to those in the sangha in need of help due to transitions in one's life such as illness, disability, or death of a loved one. Examples of tasks can include shopping, arranging for meals, or transportation. During the pandemic, we will assist in ways that can allow for mutual safety.

If you would like to volunteer or if you need assistance, please contact Kris Garvin at krisgarvin@gmail.com, Senmyo Jeff Sherman at jeffsherman3333@gmail.com, or Carol Klein at carollyklein53@gmail.com.

Bodhisattva Ceremony

The Bodhisattva Ceremony is a monthly renewal of vows and precepts. We are returning to having the Bodhisattva Ceremony in person at the zendo on Sunday morning, **January 29**, at 10:20, and on Tuesday night, **February 28**, at 7:40 instead of the second period of zazen.

Living with Impermanence

This is an informal discussion group sharing how we experience impermanence in our lives including life changes, illness, aging and death. We usually begin with participants sharing what they are currently thinking of or dealing with. Discussions then usually emerge spontaneously to raised concerns. Silence is frequently a response after someone shares and we trust in that silence. On occasion we've set an agenda in advance to study a topic of interest. For more information, contact Carol at carollyklein53@gmail.com, Kris at krisgarvin@gmail.com, or Senmyo at jeffsherman3333@gmail.com.

The Five Skandhas

by Zenki Kathleen Batson

Today I would like to share my recent thoughts about the five skandhas and how, with these five skandhas, a sense of self is constructed. I am not a scholar, just a practitioner. You should always check what I say in relation to your own experiences and understanding.

I imagine most of you, like me, first heard of the five skandhas through the *Heart Sutra* which begins, “Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when practicing deeply the prajna paramita, perceived that all five skandhas in their own being are empty and was saved from all suffering.” The *Heart Sutra* then enumerates the five skandhas. In our translation, we use the five words *form*, *feelings*, *perceptions*, *formations*, and *consciousness*. The *Heart Sutra* teaches that they are all empty.

I confess that for a really long time, the skandhas and what they refer to, were pretty impenetrable for me. They just kept glomming all together as an important list of things I was supposed to understand but really didn't. Part of what I appreciated about Zen was the lack of lists. Only recently have I been able to reach into these concepts and tease them apart in a meaningful way.

The first place where this teasing apart had an impactful meaning for me was when trying to sit *zazen* recently with really intense emotion. I found it helpful to stop trying to sit in non-discursive awareness, and I instead used the list of the five skandhas to label what I experienced arising. This created a spaciousness within my mental constructions. The Buddha taught that the five skandhas when clung to are *dukkha*, suffering. When we experience them without craving and clinging these are moments of awareness, and awareness transforms the experience of the skandhas. With intense emotion, it was easier to notice how it was all arising, what physical sensations and past experiences were contributing, and how the emotions evolved, etc., when I engaged with them in this way. It was possible to look at the process, and notice how without awareness these things would all come together to create a strong sense of self. Watch-

ing without clinging allowed a logical compassion to arise. It was an experience of, “Ah, no wonder these emotions and thoughts are arising. No wonder these feelings exist.”

The Sanskrit word “skandha” means heap, bundle, or collection. There is form, which has materiality to it, then there are the other four skandhas, which are all mental in nature. Together all five of them are also known as *nama-rupa* in Sanskrit which means name and form. Nama-rupa, the five skandhas, when viewed together collectively constitute the human individual, what we take to be a self.

We each think differently. I often think in images as opposed to words so in my tiny brain some words feel completely impenetrable. There's just a blank wall there until some other words associated with it create a doorway. To understand the skandhas better I started looking into how they are defined in various places. Perhaps hearing several different words associated with each skandha will help spark your brain to new understanding as well.

First, there is *rupa* or form. Other English terms used for form are physicality, corporeality, materiality, and substance. It consists of solid and fluid. When talking about the five skandhas, form refers to our own body and the forms we take as objects outside of ourselves to which we relate as the subject.

Second is *vedana* or what we call feelings. I used to think this meant emotions like happiness, sorrow, etc., but it refers to sensations and consists of all sensations. It is the experience of sensations at the level of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. In the book, *The Tiger's Cave*, Zen teacher, Abbott Obora says that sensation is denoted in Chinese by a character that literally means receiving. It is the function of mind and body by which everything is taken in.

Third is *samjna* or perception. Other terms used include discrimination and conceptual identification. It includes the perception or conceptual identification of form, sound, smell, taste, bodily impressions, and mental objects. According to the *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, *samjna* refers to the mental function of differentiating

and identifying objects through the apprehension of their specific qualities. *Samjna* is the perception of objects in such a way that when the object is perceived again it can be readily recognized and categorized conceptually. And of course, this is useful and necessary in day-to-day living. *Samjna* is considered the factor that perceives pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sensations as such, and gives rise to attraction, aversion, and other afflictions that motivate action. Abbot Obora uses the words, “thinking in notions, in ideas.” He says that in the skandha we call perception, things that have been taken in (through sensation) are recollected, and by this function, there is attachment to them.”

Fourth is *samskara* or formations. Other words used are mental formations, volition, volitional action, volitional factors, conditioning factors, and impulses. The term formations confused me for a really long while because *samskara* or formation, can mean anything that is made up of other things, like a flower, or a car, or an emotion, which is pretty much everything! The Buddha famously said, “All conditioned things (*samskara*) are impermanent.” When discussing the skandhas, formation refers to our mental formations and it refers to conditioning factors such as the seeds in storehouse consciousness and also conditioning forces that we don’t usually associate with consciousness (unless you are enlightened maybe) such as duration, and time. The skandha of formations includes the majority of mental activities such as volition, attention, discrimination, joy, happiness, equanimity, resolve, exertion, compulsion, concentration, etc. Formations make up the impulses to act, to do something about that pleasant or unpleasant sensation that was perceived. Abbot Obora says the general meaning of the Chinese character used for formations is action and it means the action of the mind prior to speech or outer activity.

The last skandha is *vijnana* or consciousness. We generally think in terms of six types of consciousness: visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental consciousness. Consciousness must be present when a sense organ meets an object if there are

to be feelings and perceptions. For example, the eye organ, which is a physical form, can not perceive color without eye consciousness present. That is, dead people don’t see color, and eyes without eye consciousness for other reasons such as blindness don’t see color. Abbott Obora calls consciousness “the mind-lord” which decides good or bad, right or wrong, i.e. discriminative thinking. I find it helpful to put the adjective discriminative in front of this consciousness.

When I started looking into these words and reading definitions I, of course, came across many more words that I needed to look up, and of course many other lists as is the nature of Original Buddhism. I wouldn’t have had the patience for any of this if I hadn’t already been experiencing the deconstruction of the self into these various aspects in zazen.

In the *Heart Sutra*, all the skandhas are negated. Avalokiteshvara sees that they are all empty. In Mahayana Buddhism, especially Zen, emptiness is the word we tend to use to talk about *anatman* or non-self, the absence of self. It is a key doctrine in all Buddhism that both individuals and objects are completely devoid of any unchanging, eternal or autonomous aspect. According to the Buddha, the human subject can be deconstructed into these five categories of skandhas without any remainder. In Zen and in the Buddha’s original teaching the belief in a soul or any unchanging substratum within a person is a form of mistaken identity.

Some schools of Buddhism, such as those of our Chinese ancestors, describe this truth of the emptiness of all things with the word *suchness*. Some schools use the word *buddha-nature* to describe this reality. This can get tricky because sometimes we then start to see buddha-nature, or suchness, as something eternal and unchanging within everything, which is in direct contradiction to the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha teaches that the only eternal and unchanging characteristic that can be found in anything is that it is impermanent and it is made up of other impermanent things that actually aren’t things at all. Because those characteristics are impermanent and ever-changing they can be called no characteristics!

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Emptiness, in contrast to suchness and buddha-nature, can sound cold and can lead people to a rather nihilistic view which is equally incorrect. I find it helpful to think of all these different words as human consciousness working through-out space and time to try to understand itself.

Emptiness, suchness, boundlessness – as Halifax and Tanahashi often interpret it, buddha-nature – none of these words describe a thing with substantiality.

Emptiness is not some *thing* that exists, neither is buddha-nature. It is a *way* things are experienced, a way that what we perceive as things, are happening. What we perceive as objects, or as selves are mere appearances. A mere appearance isn't nothing, but what we see is not fixed and unchanging. It is changing and it is co-dependently arising and dissipating in dependence on other mere appearances. Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.

In Dogen's teaching, the *Maka Hannya Haramitsu*, he enumerates the five skandhas as instances of *prajna*, wisdom. As the first line in the *Heart Sutra* says, "Avalokiteshvara, when practicing deeply the *prajna paramita* perceived all skandhas as empty. *Prajna Paramita* means Perfection of Wisdom. It refers to a wisdom beyond ordinary wisdom and is often said to be the wisdom that does not conceive of an agent (self), an object, or any action as being ultimately real. By real we generally mean permanent and substantial. In Zen, we generally mean the experience of emptiness or the truth of "things as it is" when using the term *prajna paramita*. This is Buddha's wisdom – the wisdom of nondiscrimination. It is considered the Mother of all Buddhas.

In the *Maka Hannya Haramitsu*, Dogen labels everything from the *Heart Sutra* as *prajna* instead of emptiness, and regularly articulates his experience of *zazen* to help us understand Buddha's teaching. And what he is articulating in *Maka Hannya Haramitsu* is the path the Buddha taught: that if we stop and see what the skandhas really are with non-discursive awareness, and notice how they come together to create a sense of self, this experience changes how we perceive

and experience them and our sense of self and this relieves suffering. This turning the light around to shine within to see how what we generally perceive as a self is arising from these different elements leads to what Thich Nhat Hanh calls transformation at the base. Abbot Obora says this is *satori* – when the real character of everything is seen.

I think for an advanced practitioner like Master Dogen, the transformation is wide-sweeping and all-encompassing. For the Buddha, it led to the complete extinguishing of all delusions including the delusion of the existence of any independent self. After this awakening, the Buddha no longer referred to himself as an "I," only as the Tathagata. To see the emptiness of the skandhas is to transform the clinging-aggregates that reinforce our sense of I, to just aggregates – they are seen as they truly are. According to Abbot Obora, "The condition... of awakening to the truth about one's body and mind, is the realization that the five aggregates are all Emptiness. Enlightenment is fully grasping this. Hitherto the five have not been Emptiness, but now there is a clear understanding of what they are."

Even if we can't or don't experience a complete transformation like the Buddha, we can all have glimpses and experiences that help guide us in our lives. In our meal chant, we talk about the natural order of mind being free from greed, hate, and delusion. Greed, hate and delusion all relate to the belief in an independent self. In *zazen*, anyone may experience moments of the natural order of mind in which greed, hate and delusion are not arising. The first time it is experienced and the ten billionth time are not exactly the same but they are not different. They are both experiences of the natural order of mind, free of greed, hate, and delusion.

In the *Heart Sutra*, Avalokiteshvara looked at the five skandhas, the five heaps, aggregates or elements, that compose what we think of as a self, and found them empty. Empty of what is always a useful question to ask. Empty of own being, *svabhava*. They are empty of an independent self-nature.

To understand what this emptiness of self or own being is, I find the cart analogy very helpful. Picture a cart, a simple four-wheeled cart with sides, and maybe an attached harness for a horse to pull it. The “cart” is there, but if we take it apart, we see that there are many things that come together to make the cart, and among those many things, there is no one thing or one place where the cart-ness of the cart is located. If we remove one wheel is it still a cart? What about two wheels? What if we remove all the sides and all the wheels and set them all out near one another, is it still a cart? What if we take all those pieces and place them in various locations, is it still a cart? At what point does it stop being a cart and where did the cart-ness go?

In the beginning of my study of Zen, I thought we were trying to understand the nature of a reality out there outside of ourselves. I was looking for a truth outside of me that with practice I might come to see. This is what I thought the common Zen phrase, “seeing things as they are or as it is,” meant. Over time it has become clear to me however that my mind always plays a role in what I perceive. As living beings there is no objective world outside of the five skandhas that is reachable to us without using our own bodies and minds to experience it. The nearest we come to objectivity is to see how our minds function in creating what we perceive and experience.

The Buddha taught about the truth and reality of our own minds, how they function, and most specifically how we create suffering and how we can relieve it. There are many questions he never answered. According to Thanissaro Bhikku of the Tai Forest tradition, the Buddha never actually specifically answered the question of whether a self exists or not in an ontological sense. The Buddha did use the teaching of non-self to help us understand how what we perceive as an independent self is a delusion, but when asked straight out about it, he remained silent. Perhaps because in the truth of *prajna*, of non-discursive awareness, concepts like self or no-self are not applicable. They’re just concepts.

Okumura Roshi will often speak about how a hand is both one hand and also a collection of fingers.

We can break the fingers down further into being composed of skin, flesh, bone, and marrow. Each of these elements can also be broken down. Marrow, for example, can then be broken down further into red marrow, yellow marrow, red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets. Red blood cells can be broken down into the various part of a cell, etc., until you end up with nothing. We can’t name one aspect among all of these elements that by itself makes the hand the hand. All things are like this.

What we call an individual self is the same way. If we look very closely and experience with full awareness, we can experience the breakdown of the self into the five aggregates of form, feelings, perceptions, formations, and consciousness, and all these can also be broken down. The form — our body — can be broken down similarly to the way we broke down the hand. Sensations have texture and nuance, they come and go. Formations come together through past experiences, thoughts, genetics, and karma etc. When we sit and experience the arising and passing away of these various elements without attachment, a loosening occurs. The fallacy of a concrete identity becomes clearer. Body and mind are dropped off.

When I think of the skandhas and how they form a concrete sense of self I think of a rope. The self is like a thick sturdy rope. Sustained awareness of mind and experiences and what is arising, is like a sharp tool pulling apart all the strands of fiber, first at a grosser level then at a finer and finer level until there is no rope there at all, just the various strands. A new awareness of how we and others come to be who and what we are emerges, and compassion for *how* beings come to be who and what they are emerges. I imagine that in this analogy, the Buddha deconstructed that rope of self into tiny strands then into small microfibers, then molecules, then atoms! Poof!

So here I am trying to give a talk on the skandhas and non-self. I am giving a talk on how there is no self. That sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? I am really here at some level, and I feel very much like an individual with a specific job to do right now which is to try to talk about how Zen tells us there is no independent self. That there is no self

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doesn't mean nothing is here. So what is causing this attempt at a talk? It is an unfathomable number of causes and conditions through beginningless space and time coming together to attempt this talk. Neil DeGrasse said, "The very molecules that make up your body, the atoms that construct the molecules, are traceable to the crucibles that were once the centers of high mass stars that exploded their chemically rich guts into the galaxy."

We could try to think of all the various streams of aggregates and energy and strands of karma that have twisted and intertwined and come together through time to this moment of being in this position of formulating words to convey concepts to other streams of aggregates with the intention of helping alleviate suffering. Different possible causes and conditions would have led to these five skandhas being engaged in other activities right now such as possibly sitting outdoors having a cup of coffee, possibly even a cigarette. Or, getting on the subway in NYC, or sleeping after a late night at work. Previous activities in which these (points to self) streams of skandhas engaged could have led to any one of those scenarios at this moment if other choices were made, which would have created different trajectories from the current one.

These five skandhas also co-arise differently when in different circumstances. Here I am Zenki. Among old friends, this is Kath, with my partner I am Leenie unless he is unhappy with me. With my stepdad, I was MFZ "My Favorite Zenki." I say those words and I hear his raspy voice and laughter and that evokes memories and loving emotions arise. Now that he is gone I am no longer MFZ to anyone.

Noticing what volitional formations are pushing what states of mind towards what expressions with this corporal form – this is what we are doing in zazen. Not with a specific goal to accomplish something or to gain something, just an interest, and curiosity in seeing what's there. And all these words to navigate what it is can be very helpful. That's probably why Dogen wrote so many words. Lucky us! Understanding the words conceptually however is not the activity itself and

does not constitute the wisdom that Avalokiteshvara is practicing in the *Heart Sutra*, the *experience* of emptiness.

In *The Tiger's Cave*, Abbott Obora equates an empty heart with Kanzeon, the bodhisattva of compassion. It may be difficult at first to equate an empty heart with compassion. An empty heart may sound cold, but if you think about it an empty heart has a lot of room for whatever and whomever it meets. An empty heart isn't full of opinions. It has spaciousness, and room to accept others where they are without an agenda.

We don't need to worry about whether we can achieve some kind of state of complete emptiness or completely extinguish our delusive belief in an independent self. Anything we think about these things is just deluded notions. As Dogen says, "When you realize buddha-dharma, you do not think, 'This is realization just as I expected....Realization is not like your conception of it...You should reflect on this: What you think one way or another before realization is not a help for realization.'" We can just appreciate the adventure of seeing what is arising and allow the loosening of our grasp on a specific self, to guide us.

Sojun Mel Weitsman Roshi said, "Bodhisattva mind is the mind which is always turning toward practice, which means it is always fundamentally grounded in emptiness and is expressed through our activity. Bodhisattva mind is the mind which is always giving up self-centeredness in order to see into the truth. So we always keep returning to that mind. It's like sitting zazen, we have all this activity going on and thoughts are coming up and desires keep arising. So in daily life, when some question comes up, you return your mind to the Fundamental, in order to come to a decision. How does my decision accord with this non self-centered view? If you keep doing that, then you're continuously practicing."

Thank you.

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Chapel Hill Zen Center

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In-Person Schedule

Monday, Wednesday & Friday Mornings

6:00 zazen (Zen meditation)
6:40 kinhin (walking meditation)
6:50 zazen
7:20 service

Sunday Mornings

9:00 zazen
9:40 kinhin
9:50 zazen
10:20 service or lecture

Tuesday Evenings

7:00 zazen
7:40 kinhin
7:50 zazen

Zoom Schedule

Monday to Friday Mornings

6:00 zazen (Zen meditation)
6:40 kinhin (walking meditation)
6:50 zazen

Monday & Friday Afternoons

1:00 - 1:40 zazen

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Cold Rain at the Seashore

*Looking out over the bay,
seeing clouds of cold rain
Summoning winter,
Hear the wind in the pines
whisper its name*

– Rengetsu (1791-1875)

Embracing diversity, the Chapel Hill Zen Center expresses the fundamental connection of all beings by welcoming everyone to the practice of zazen. May all beings realize their true nature.