ZEN NOTES

SOKEI-AN SAYS

THE FIVE SKANDHAS

The five shadows, or five accumulations, are very important. The Buddha spoke about these five shadows from a very early period. When you open the primitive sutras like the Agamas, you will find the term, the Five Skandhas, almost on the first page. In the West, however, Buddhist scholars have paid little attention to the Five Skandhas.

To think about our mind as a sphere, as the whole universe, we think there are about five different shades. If it were light, it would be white light in the center, then this white light would be enveloped by blue light, the blue light would be enveloped by green light, the green light enveloped by red light, and that by purple light. Our minds, or, if I use your word, consciousness, has that many different shades. You must not observe someone else's mind from the outside to find these five shadows, but you must meditate upon your own mind to realize these five different stages.

The first shadow on the surface of the sphere is this physical and material body which is perceived by your eyes--your own body, the furniture about you, space, rivers and mountains, oceans. You must think that they are your body. They are as much your body as your flesh is your body. And when you look up at the sky you must conceive that it is your body also. If I correspond this sphere to color, it would be purple. The next shadow is sense-perception. This consciousness sees and hears and has sense of smell and sense of touch and sense of taste. It has sense of feeling--to feel cold, to feel warm, to feel hot. If I describe this corresponding to a color, it is like red. Or this sense of perceiving outer existence can be compared to a box and this outer existence is the lid. Without the sense organs we cannot see the outside and without the outside nature would not bestow upon us the sense of hearing or seeing.

The third sphere is entirely different in nature. It is, in a word, thoughts. When you close your eyes you will find many thoughts come out from the depths of your mind and go away. When one goes away another thought comes. Or, they are like a dream. It appears in your mind and the sense of sight sympathetically carries it out in the sense of sight and your consciousness perceives it and it is a so-called dream. And you are in the dream and your consciousness is perceiving it. The relation between you in the dream and

your consciousness which perceives it is very queer.Do you think you are perceiving yourself in the dream,or is it someone else who perceives you in the dream?You see your face,your body,yourself,but who is the one who perceives yourself? He who perceives it is not you yourself,it is called consciousness. Whose consciousness is not talked about. Your consciousness or Nature's consciousness? We do not need to talk about it. Corresponding this to color--there is no necessity for corresponding it to any particular color,but at the moment I would say temporarily that it corresponds to green.

And then inside of this sphere there is another stage of consciousness. It is not very different from thoughts or dreams,but everything in this fourth sphere is so fine and so ephemeral--existing then disappearing--it is like a dewdrop which shines and disappears. Or,it is like lightning in the sky. It flashes through your mind for a moment,and then vanishes. You can hardly grasp it with your mind. It is like seeds,seeds of thought,seeds of emotions,seeds of desire,seeds of imagination. Someone in Buddhism in the ancient days carefully counted out the sorts or kinds of seeds in this sphere and said there were seventy-five different groups of seeds. In meditation you always find that you feel something all of a sudden and that you cannot put that feeling into a word. What was it? How can you speak about it? You fail to find a word to denote it to someone else. Then all of a sudden you say: " Wait a moment. That was ice in the air. If an aviator were to go through he would be frozen to death so he would go around that ice-air. It's something like that. But I cannot give you any particular name." If you were a poet and felt some particular feeling--round,small,not shining,but white--and you would try to put it into words...suddenly " shingle beach." Thus you carry out that feeling in words. But you cannot find it in words,really. Or,you feel very queer. You feel something disturbing you but you cannot find the reason. Then all of a sudden some person comes near you and you shout out and that seed comes out to your mind and you clearly find out what it was. Perhaps we can temporarily borrow your term,sub-conscious mind, for this. Buddhists give a name to it,in Sanskrit Samskara.

Samskara is sometimes translated into English as confection,something which means not candy,but concomitants,the many seeds of things gathered. You will feel Samskara not only within yourself but also outside where,though you cannot express it by words,you can come very close to it.Nature in this state of existence always has this quality strongly and asserts it. When you come to a weeping willow,there is a particular element it has which gives you a sad feeling. The weeping willow speaks its own word to you. The pine tree also speaks its own word to you. A poet who speaks about the pine tree would have to write ten or fifteen lines but the pine tree speaks to you without a word. In such a way you feel that particular Samskara existence,as it speaks to your own Samskara,your own feeling.

The fifth sphere is like the core of an apple. In the center of the sphere it is called consciousness.Corresponding it to color,it is white.

I illustrated the relation between the senses and the outside citing a box and lid. When I illustrate for you the relation between this consciousness and the sphere of concomitants and the sphere of thoughts, consciousness is a box which has two lids,one lid which is made of fine material and one lid which is made of coarse material.

Now I am going to talk about the five shadows from the inside out. The first one,consciousness,is called Vijnana in Sanskrit. Next is Samskara. The third is Samjna. These three are in one group like the yolk of an egg,the white and the shell. The fourth is sense-perception. In Sanskrit Vedana means to know,to perceive,to understand. The outermost is physical existence,Rupa. These two outermost,Vedana and Rupa,are related in a group,the material outside and the sense-perception which perceives the outside. Samjna,Samskara and Vijnana may be regarded as a family,the inside world. Samjna is a coarse boy; Samskara is a delicate girl and Vijnana is the mother. These are the so-called five accumulated shadows of consciousness.

As a whole our consciousness is not only this body,but everything. All the outside,all outer existences,are consciousness also from the Buddhist standpoint. So there is no matter at all,all is consciousness. Meditating on these different shadows finally you will reach the mother-consciousness,Vijnana,consciousness itself. Then you will find who is he who meditates upon consciousness.You will find there was no one meditating upon consciousness,it was consciousness itself meditating upon its own mind. You ask, "Do I need to meditate upon my own mind?" "No." "Then what are you meditating upon?" "Nothing." Then you will find this consciousness which is not yourself,but which to your deluded mind is ego,which from your deluded state of mind you call ego.

When you observe thus your observation of the world from the Buddhist standpoint begins.

How do you observe these five accumulated shadows? You will find they are nothing but the shadows of your mind. Then you can form the so-called Buddhist mind.

Now I shall explain about this Buddhist mind,how the Buddhist looks at the outside and how he looks at the inside,how the Buddhist abides in his own consciousness. I always repeat the same subject,and although I do not want to repeat it again,I shall do so briefly.

When we see this outside we meditate upon this outside. The tree is green,the flower is red,the sky is blue. When I was a child I asked many questions of my parents,of my schoolteachers,but they could not explain. My first question was, "Why is the sky blue? In the summertime the sky appears blue,dark blue. Why is it?" One schoolteacher explained--his explanation was erroneous but he seriously explained to me--that light flashes through the air but it does not flash outside the air,in the

ether. In the ether all is dark. When light travels through the ether it does not shine, but when it comes to air it begins to shine. When the atmosphere becomes very clear, then through the air we see this darkness behind the air which peeps through the shining air and appears blue. " Perhaps so," I said. " Then, teacher, that must be the bottom of the sky." " Yes," he told me, " in the summertime you can see the bottom of the sky." Poor child! Later in grammar school the teacher laughed at this and said that the color is due to the reflection of light on the dust. Coarse dust settles down but fine dust does not and appears blue as the light plays on it. Steam creates a different color. But the basic cause of the color is dust. I did not ask any further questions, but took it that this dust is the answer.

Well, why is the sky blue? If you study optics you will quickly find the answer. But Buddhist teachers tell you color is not in the object, but on the retina of your eye, the reaction against the vibration on the retina of your eye.

Then what is that which really exists outside? If color is here, sound is here, what is this real entity which is introduced, this vibration, this sound in my ear, this color in my eye, this pain in my body? Should I call the whole world vibration? Power? Energy? The beginning of the Buddhist life is to puzzle about everything.

TWO THINGS in this article--the first also appearing in last month's article--might prove obstacles to literal-minded persons. Sokei-an's statement that the Five Shadows, or, previously, Rupa, appear on the " first page" of the Agamas does not constitute a practical reference but is his way of indicating their antiquity. The second is Sokei-an's use of the word " correspond" as a transitive verb. This can be observed in many of his lectures. As the meaning is quite clear once you're used to it, we see no reason for alteration of his characteristic expression.

Published monthly by
THE FIRST ZEN INSTITUTE OF AMERICA, INC.
156 Waverly Place, New York 14, New York

Non-Profit Org.
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PAID
New York, N.Y.
Permit No. 528

Form 3547 Requested

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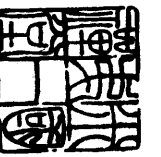

Vol. VII, No. 6 Jun. 1960
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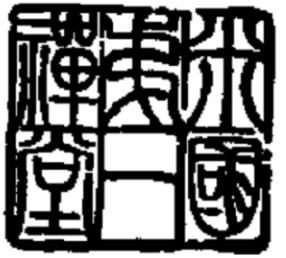
Founded in 1930 by
Sokei-an Sasaki



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