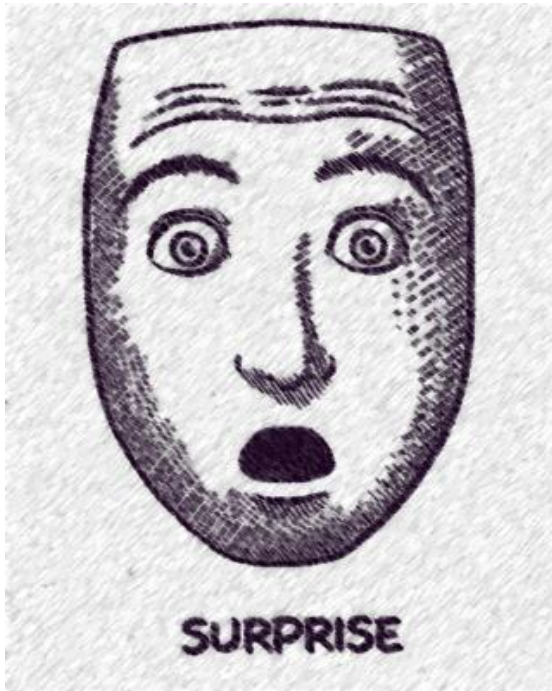


Expect to be Surprised

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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The weather has cooled as autumn winds shake leaves from the trees, twirling above and then settling upon the cold water of the monastery ponds. The koi and goldfish have been moved to an indoor pond built by the shissui and, revived by the warmth and light of their new environment, play tag and other fishly games, identifying each other through colour, shape and sound. Students pausing to watch are themselves watched through fish eyes and remembered.

At first appearance of a face looming above the surface of the water, the koi usually dart under the floating plants, but if they recognize the face, will come out from under the tangle of leaves and roots for a closer look. And darting away is good because, of course, there are beings whose interest in fish is much more about eating them than looking at them. So while the fish may just look calm and peaceful, they are alert and inquisitive and they are ready to flee if need be.

The process of cognition and perception described as the five skandhas is as evident in their behaviour as it is in the behaviour of human beings. Human beings, however, have a much wider range of information to contend with and so the distortion that can occur through misinterpretation or getting stuck at one of the five skandhas can be much greater, sometimes with devastating results for oneself or for others.

The five skandhas of form, reactivity, symbolization, habitual patterning and consciousness describe the process of perception and cognition from the moment a detail is noticed and how it may be interpreted. Initially, in the moment of noticing something, there is just "Oh. Something" (form skandha). Following that there is reactivity: should I run away, hide under a plant or something, can I fuck it or eat it, or can I just ignore it? With symbolization skandha we look for a file match: is this like something I have experienced before? And then with habitual patterning skandha we extend the file match into "Okay, if it is like that other

thing I've experienced, how did I behave?" With consciousness skandha the forming of the frame is complete: "Ah, I see. It's friendly, I don't need to run. I've seen this before and this is how I should behave towards it". Or "Oh shit, bad thing, run away!" or "Fight back!" or "Kill it before it kills me!"

The process of cognition and perception described by the five skandhas takes place very, very quickly, and is continuously rising and falling. So while one can see larger examples of it, as is illustrated by the fish, moment after moment, the five skandhas are playing themselves out in how you are experiencing everything you experience. Traditionally it is said that sixty mind-moments take place in the amount of time it takes you to snap your fingers. But these are just the most obvious mind-moments. When you notice a thought, it is well after the fact of it's arising and there were countless processes involved, countless movements of one skandha into the next and into the next and into the next, with many cycles of skandha activity occurring simultaneously as minute details of perception forming and reforming.

Now, it's not that perception and cognition are a bad thing. Obviously they are not. But the five skandhas are a compulsive piling up and bunching of perception and cognition. In fact the Sanskrit word "skandha" means "heap" or "pile". Through practice, they can open into the five wisdoms. But unless they do and until they do, they will just pile up to propagate the three klesas of passion, aggression, and stupidity.

Stupidity klesa is the klesa people indulge in most often because passion and aggression are simply too exhausting to sustain for any length of time and we're too lazy to stay in them for long. Stupidity is much easier. Rather than opening around our reactivity, we will tend to flatten everything out and limit our noticing to the usual, the familiar.

How you have experienced experiencing from the time you got up this morning, so much of it was familiar, was it not? - The same dreaded interruption of sleep by the alarm clock, the colour of your toothbrush, the smell of soap, struggling with your socks, the familiar routines of leaving your house. And then arriving at the monastery: struggling with your socks, walking through hallways, hearing the familiar sounds of the densho. And then when the sitting started: that same old twinge in your knee as you took your seat; the rituals of tucking and folding and arranging your clothing, scratching your nose as you usually do even though it doesn't itch but might -that you engage in instead of the dignified ceremony and celebration of the forms; the familiar feel of the chanting text in your hand as you picked it up; the sound of the gong, and right now, the familiar sound of my voice. And yet the truth of the matter is that moment to moment, [Katsu!] you never know what is going to happen.

When we block out the details of experiencing, we settle into stupidity klesa. This is an activity that we indulge in; something that we choose to do. And it is not necessary. Ignorance is not necessary; it comes about through flattening everything out, by ignoring the details of experiencing.

In Anzan Hoshin roshi's translation of the "Xinxin Ming" it says,

*"It is not good to sicken the mind
by avoiding the unknown and holding the familiar".*

Where are we? And what is really going on here? Gazing at the white wall, is the wall just one colour? Open your eyes and pay attention to what you are seeing. White is not just one colour; it is many, many shades which change as the light in the room changes. As you hear the sound of my words are you also noticing the

spaces between and around the words? Are you feeling into the myriad of sensations of the bodymind sitting, and opening to the spaces around the sensations? We tend to notice what we deem to be “good” and what we deem to be “bad” but through avoidance and glazing, screen out what is neutral. We do this with sensations, with the seeing, with hearing, with all of the sense bases. For example, when looking at another person what we “like” about this person or “dislike” about this person will tend to stand out because we will focus on those details, but we don’t notice the depth of space between ourselves and the other person, or that the space extends all around them. Unless we are noticing the space in which they arise, what we are seeing is not seen in context and so our perceptions of that person or that situation are skewed.

In the teisho series, “Round and Bright”, the Roshi says:

Sitting here within this moment, before us, after us, all around us – we don’t know what anything is. And yet, everything seems so familiar to us, so already known that the possibility of actually questioning our assumptions, our beliefs, our convictions, seems strange and unfamiliar.

But what is it that we are saying when we say the word, “familiar”? This word that we use so readily and easily comes from the Latin for, “family” – something that we know well. We all know our mothers, our fathers, our sons, our daughters. But how often do we actually allow ourselves to actually meet them as they are, beyond our stories about who they are in relation to our stories and beyond their stories about themselves? How often do we allow ourselves to simply see them, hear them, touch them? Our familiarity makes us distant and abstract. We interact only with our own projections and the effect that the projections of others have upon us.

But surely we can step past this vagueness, this abstraction and open into actual contact, actual intimacy with these people that we see everyday. Surely that is possible.

There have been moments – seeing the frailty of your aging mother, the web of wrinkles around the eyes that show you not only how much more wrinkled you’re going to get, but... something vulnerable, something naked, something stark, something vivid about the reality of these eyes and ears, this nose, elbows.

There have been moments like this. And surely, despite the fact that moment after moment we are breathing in and breathing out, seeing and hearing, sitting, walking, standing and lying down – it is possible for us to be fully present and intimate and present with our own eyes. And there have been such moments. In such moments, what seemed familiar revealed itself as fresh, and vivid and alive.

But I say that it is at that time: when we allow ourselves to come close to our own experience, that then we can understand another meaning to the word “familiar”: “Intimacy”.

All of the instruction you have received in practice interviews, in daisan, in person or by email, from teisho, Dharma Talks, texts, from demonstrations of forms, from every interaction you have had with Teachers and practice advisors have been about asking you to allow yourself to experience this intimacy of experiencing. When you are asked to align with the timing of a senior leading a bow, or oryoki or the kata or the chants, you are being asked to practise this intimacy of experiencing which is the heart of Zen practice.

A few days before the koi were moved indoors, the Roshi stopped by the pond to see the fish. They know his

face well, but on this occasion he was wearing a wide-brimmed hat which they had never seen before, so they darted under the plants and watched him through the leaves. Realizing that they were not recognizing him, he took his hat off, then put it on again and repeated this a few times so that they could get used to the newness of the hat. They very quickly committed the hat to memory and came to the surface of the water to meet him.

The space of experiencing can look like all kinds of things to you and you may have made a habit of hiding for all kinds of reasons, but none of this applies here and now, as we all sit in the Hatto. So come out from under whatever it is that you hide behind, whether it be your memories or your associations, or that numbing familiarity. As the Roshi often says, "Come out and play."

The fish have their games. We have ours. They are the play of colours, forms, and sounds, the coming and going of moments, the fact that you do not know what any moment that arises will actually be like. Opening with wonder to this wonderful practice and the unknowability of this moment as an object, we can practice and realize "jijiyu-zanmai" the harmony of a joy which enjoys itself if only we let go of our "selves" and the compulsion to cling and avoid, to flatten and fold.

As Eihei Dogen zenji says in the Genjokoan, The Question of Our Lives,

"No matter how far a fish swims, it doesn't come to the end of the ocean. No matter how far a bird flies, it doesn't come to the end of the sky. Since the beginning, fish and birds have always been one with their elements. When there is a great need, a great use appears. When there is a small need, a small use appears. Thus the full use of things is always as it is. Wherever something is, it covers its own ground. If a bird cut itself off from the sky it would die. If a fish cut itself off from water it would die. Also, the life of the sky is the bird itself, the life of the water is the fish. The bird is life, the fish is life. You can expand on these examples if you'd like. Practice, enlightenment, long and short life are examples.

If a bird or fish ever even tried to escape its own element it would be without its own place. Realizing your life as your life you realize the exertion of Awake Awareness. Realizing this, everything you do is actually done as the Way itself."

So, please, come out and play. Instead of falling into the familiarity of your expectations, expect to be surprised, allow yourself to wordlessly wonder with the whole bodymind and the whole moment.