Five Aggregates Review and Exploring the Sense of Self

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:03

Last week Tueri began an exploration of the five aggregates and seeing those processes begin to reveal the not-self nature of our experience. Then Greg mentioned the aggregates in the morning, and Brian talked about intention. These topics all weave together. I thought I'd do another flyby of the aggregates, looking at how the Buddha spoke about them. One of the main teachings with respect to the aggregates is how we tend to construct a sense of self around them.

They're called the aggregates of clinging. We tend to cling to and identify with these aggregates, and that is what we experience as a sense of self. The Buddha called this I-making and my-making.

In exploration of the sense of self, we discover that the sense of self is an arising. When we say experience is not self, we don't mean that the sense of self is nothing, because the sense of self is an experience that's put together through clinging to these aggregates. It is a powerful process. Much like some other mental formations are processes that shape our experience, that shape our choices, that shape how we relate to the world, so too is a sense of self something that really shapes our experience. And yet we can see it. We can see it as a process and begin to understand it. Through the seeing of it, we start to see that it is not what we think it is.

We often tend to attribute a sense of stability to a sense of self. Before I started practicing, I was pretty miserable, and I thought of myself as miserable. I was occasionally happy, but when I was happy, something like this would happen in my mind: "Well, I'm happy now, but I know what I really am is miserable." So I was imputing a sense of a carrying on of that miserableness, even when it wasn't there. I was identifying that as who I was.

We often impute this sense of stability to a sense of self. But when we start actually looking at the experience, that arising of happiness—with miserableness not arising—was evidence that I wasn't actually a miserable person. Miserableness was just something that arose sometimes. This is the way Tueri talked about her anger and the recognition that anger is just something that comes up now and then. It's not who I am.

As we begin to be curious about the sense of self, curious about what the experience actually is when it feels like there's a sense of self here, an investigation and curiosity arise around it. We begin to see that the sense of self arises. And in seeing that it arises, we see that it wasn't there a few moments before. We begin to understand something about the not-self nature of the sense of self.

We may see at times the sense of self, recognizing it, seeing it, feeling it, and then it vanishes—maybe replaced by another sense of self. Just the seeing of the mutating experiences that we call self begins to point out that they are impermanent, not stable. The very observation of what we call self, of the experience of self, begins to point out the not-self nature of it.

In this talk, I'll review the five aggregates and then discuss what it might mean to study the self, to be curious about observing the self.

There's a famous quote by the Zen master Dogen. Some of you may know it: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. And to forget the self is to be awakened by all things."

This studying the self—I would say studying the sense of self—means we get curious about it, we explore what it is, what it feels like, what the experience is. Through that exploration we begin to see that it's not what we think it is, and we begin to understand the not-self nature of experience.

The Buddha talked about this process of selfing through the lens of the teaching on the five aggregates. I'll review a little of what Tueri offered last week, perhaps in some different language.

That word "aggregates"—I think Tueri mentioned this—is not a very usual word. We don't use it much in the English language to refer to anything about our personal lives. If you're a geologist, you might talk about aggregate rock, but it's not a common word for us. My understanding is that the term *khandha* that the Buddha used means something like group or heap or bundle. It was a common word. People might say they were carrying a khandha of sticks, or point to a heap of rocks. It was an ordinary word, one that was used a lot, and I think it was used because people could relate to it.

While "aggregate" sounds technical and hard to wrap our minds around—a weird word for us—it's actually a pretty good word for what is being talked about.

perception, mental formations, and consciousness—the five aggregates. And each one of these has a whole collection of experiences connected with it.

So form, the body, has all of the experiences of the physical realm associated with it. It's a heap, a collection of physical sensations. The word "aggregate" means something like that collection. If we think of what an aggregate rock is, it's actually a rock made of rocks—so it's a collection. But the word "aggregate" is also a verb that means something like to collect, to gather.

And in the suttas, the Buddha actually referred to these five khandhas both as what we could call nouns—as experiences, the *what* of our experience—and as processes. He described them both as nouns and verbs.

The noun side of the form aggregate is just the physical experience: body sensations, the pulsing, tingling, vibration, coolness, heat—just the bare elemental body sensations. This is an aspect of the form element. Even within the eye, the eye itself is form, and the sights, the contact with sights—I understand also like

the light waves and what contacts the eye—that's also form. What we experience there is basically form and color in the realm of the eye. In the ear door, there's pitch and tone. The sound waves hit our ear, and the rapidity of the vibration and how strong the vibration is creates the sense of pitch and tone. That's all form.

The Buddha also talked about these aggregates as processes. In one sutta, he described them as verbs. I won't go through all five of them here, but I'll give you a flavor of one. Somebody was asking the Buddha, "Why is it called feeling?" And the Buddha responded, "It feels. That's why it's called feeling. What does it feel? It feels pleasant. It feels unpleasant. It feels neither pleasant nor unpleasant."

This definition incorporates both sides of the aggregates—as being both the process that experiences things and what is experienced. So feeling is both the process that feels and what is felt: pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. The Buddha goes through this for all of the aggregates, defining them in terms of their process nature.

And so I think of the aggregates in some ways as what we experience—the actual content when we notice with mindfulness what is being experienced—but also the processes of body and mind. The aggregates are like the processes that tumble on, creating our experience moment to moment.

The teaching of the aggregates includes all the aspects of what we experience in the present moment. I understand the aggregates as being the conditioned happenings of our experience—pretty much everything that happens. All conditioned arisings are part of the aggregates. And we can look at all those conditioned arisings, which the Buddha divided up in a particular way: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.

There are other teachings, other ways that he divided up this realm of our conditioned experience. One is the six sense bases, which I think we're all familiar with: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body—and then the mind. The six sense bases teaching talks about the experiences at those sense bases and their objects. Again, all the conditioned arisings there.

I like that there are these two flavors of describing the realm of our experience. The six sense bases divides up our experience with a kind of weight on the sense impression realm—we've got five of those and one mind door. That's one way to study experience, noticing all the aspects of body and of mind, but with an emphasis on body in a way.

With the aggregates, the emphasis is shifted. There's one aspect related to body—the form aggregate, related to all five sense bases and their objects. And then the other four aggregates—feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—are all related to processes of mind. So this is an exploration of how our minds do their thing in a very detailed way: processes of mind that come together to create our experience.

So, just a review. I've been talking about form a little bit—form being the experience of our physical

realm, including all of the sense bases and their experiences.

Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—these experiences at their most rudimentary level. We talked a lot about the elemental nature of our bodily experience. That's in the form aggregate.

Now, our minds tend to put together experience and understand it using the other aggregates. For instance, as I look out here, I see people and I see zafus and walls and lights and chairs. I know that what's actually happening is form and color hitting the eye. That's the bare experience of the form aggregate—just shape and color. But it happens so fast that our minds pick up and understand and put things together so that I see people, zafus, chairs. But that part of the processing is more in the realm of perception. So the form aggregate is just this bare aspect of our physical experience.

Then feeling—we've talked about quite a bit—that experience of pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is a mental experience. We can recognize this mental quality because we can see, through observing feeling tone and watching it change, that the feeling tone is not in the sense impression itself. The feeling tone depends on conditions. It depends on what we've learned in our past. It depends on conditions happening right now. There's a conditioned nature to feeling tone. Whether we experience something as pleasant or unpleasant, it's not in the object itself—it's in our body and mind's experience of it.

An example to make this more concrete: this was perhaps the first time I really saw the conditioned nature of feeling tone so clearly. I think it was my first three-month retreat here. We were having a very simple meal in the evening—bean dip and an apple. That was my dinner. So I took a bite of the bean dip and noticed the taste, the bitterness of the beans and the oiliness of the flavor spreading over the tongue. I don't remember much about pleasant or unpleasant with respect to the bean dip. But when I took a bite of the apple, I was just overwhelmed with pleasantness. It was like the best apple ever. It was so good. I think it was probably September—they had just picked apples off the tree. It was a really fresh, crisp apple, very juicy. I was just taken by the pleasantness of it. And I was interested in the feeling tone; that was just what was being noticed.

As I kept eating, I noticed some interesting things. The pleasantness of the apple was more intense after the bean dip. After a couple bites of apple, the pleasantness diminished. If I just had apple, apple, apple, apple, the pleasantness was not as intense. The second bite was not nearly as overwhelming as the first. But then I had some bean dip, and the next bite of apple was like, "Wow, that's so good." So I began to see that the pleasantness was conditioned—in this case, the intensity of pleasantness was conditioned.

There are other times when I've noticed something unpleasant that, in a different context, became pleasant, though I can't give you a specific example right now. But I've seen that happen too. Perhaps thinking about temperature provides an illustration. Fifty degrees—right now, fifty degrees feels pretty cold and might feel unpleasant if you walk outside without a sweatshirt. But after a few ten-degree days, if you walk out and it's fifty degrees, it might feel quite pleasant.

Again, the conditions creating that difference. And so the pleasant-unpleasant feeling is dependent on conditions. It is constructed by the mind putting things together. This can be seen. We can be curious about this, noticing how feeling tone changes.

Then perception is the process of recognition. As I said, it's like looking out here and seeing chairs and zabutons and people and walls and lights—that's all the process of perception. Our mind takes in sense impressions and looks for the nearest match. You've seen lots of chairs before. You go into a room, you've never seen that particular chair, but you've seen lots of chairs before, so you know that thing is probably a chair. This is a kind of pattern-matching function. This is the process of perception—that process where the mind goes in and finds the nearest match.

It doesn't always work. It doesn't always make a perfect match. And we can see that sometimes too. One time I walked into a room in very dim light and looked across the room at this odd shape, kind of a big odd shape. The first perception my mind put on it was: a deformed being. I saw that perception arise in my mind and said, "No, no, no—not a deformed being." Then something else came up, and it took three or four perceptions before the mind recognized that it was a vase of flowers. Part of the condition there was the dimness, so it wasn't immediately clear. The process of perception is not perfect. It's just this process of recognizing, doing the best it can to recognize the experience.

We can see perception like I just described. It can be very interesting to notice when something's not quite recognized—we can see our mind trying things on like that. Or we might recognize perception through another door. One of the easiest ways for me to recognize perception is with the ear door. Hearing a sound in meditation, there's the sound itself—the vibration, the pitch, the tone—but then there's a label that our minds put on it. "Bird" or "lawnmower." That might appear as a word in our mind, or it might appear as an image. I think we talked about this a little last week. That kind of identification often comes through language or imagery. It can also come through felt sense. But that identification is the process of perception.

Then consciousness is just this bare meeting of experience, just the knowing aspect of experience. Consciousness is understood to be six kinds: sense consciousness, one with each sense base. So there's seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, smelling consciousness, taste consciousness, touch consciousness, and mind consciousness. It's just this bare recognition. Sense impression hits the eye and there's eye consciousness. A really simple aspect of experience. Just the knowing.

Volitional formations is not usually the last one in the list, but I wanted to spend a little more time with it, so I've put it last. Mental formations is the volitional aspect of experience. This is a lot of what we see on retreat—what our minds are doing, the doings of our mind. This is the whole host of mental activities that happen related to intention, related to volition. Not necessarily a conscious volition or a conscious choice, like something we're actively choosing in the present moment to do. But these activities of mind have a kind of momentum.

Like anger, for instance. I think we know this. We know this sense of these mind states or mental formations having an activity nature to them. When we're angry, we see how it tends to shape our thoughts, our actions. They have a shaping quality, these mental formations. So this includes our emotions, our thoughts, mind states. It includes the range of experience from the reactive emotions to the wholesome mind states.

One of the teachings around volitional formations that I find very interesting is this process nature of the volitional formations that the Buddha describes—the verb nature of the mental formations. I'm going to read this section. This is Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation of the section of the sutta that describes mental formations, volitional formations, in terms of a verb, an activity, of what it does.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses the term "fabrication" to translate volitional formations, and I like the way this comes out in the whole of this passage:

Why are they called fabrications?

And the Buddha responds: *Because they fabricate fabricated things. That's why they're called fabrications. What do they fabricate as fabricated things? For the sake of form, they fabricate form as a fabricated thing. For the sake of feeling, they fabricate feeling as a fabricated thing. For the sake of perception, they fabricate perception as a fabricated thing. For the sake of fabrication, they fabricate fabrications as a fabricated thing. For the sake of consciousness, they fabricate consciousness as a fabricated thing. They fabricate fabricated things, thus they are called fabrications.*

This is actually very profound. What he's saying is that the mental formations—anger, for instance—when anger arises, it's shaping all the rest of our experience. It's shaping all the aggregates. The fabrications arise in dependence on prior fabrications, and then they shape in turn the entirety of our experience.

Take anger as an example. When anger arises, we often feel its effect on the body—pressure and heat. It may actually physically distort the face, make it kind of harsh. We can often tell when somebody is angry by the look on their face. People aren't thinking, "Let me distort my face." Anger is doing the job. Anger is shaping the body there, fabricating the form.

Anger also tends to shape unpleasant feeling. When anger is arising, things tend to be unpleasant. There is occasionally some pleasant in there. As I noticed while observing anger very closely on one retreat, the first hit of the moment when anger arose—the very first split second—there was this sense in the body like, *whew*. There was this feeling of, "I know, I understand, I can do, I have power, I have control." There was this split second of real pleasantness. It quickly turned to unpleasant heat, pressure, tension, the whole host of mental thoughts and activities that are often unpleasant connected with anger. But the first split second of it was pleasant. I was like, wow, maybe that's the hook. Maybe that's why I go for anger, for that feeling.

Anger tends to shape how we perceive things. We tend to perceive through the lens of anger. One time

doing walking meditation, I was noticing anger, just generally noticing that anger was present. I've watched a lot of anger on my retreats, in my life. I've spent a lot of time looking at anger. I was walking back and forth, and on one of my passes I turned around at the end of my path—it was downstairs in the basement—and after I turned around, I saw somebody else's shoes at the end of my path. The perception was like, "What are those doing here? This is not what's supposed to be happening." Looking at the experience, the whole anger was shaping the perception of those shoes as being in my path. If I had been in another state of mind, it might have been, "Oh wow, look at those shoes! They're so cool. Where did they come from? They just appeared." But no, there was anger, so the mind was shaping the perception.

Our consciousness is also directed by the filter of anger—any mental formation, really. I'm just using anger as an example here. It's like selective attention. I've noticed that when the mind is in a very aversive state and I walk into a room, I notice things I don't like. Consciousness will highlight the things I don't like. In another state of mind, I might walk into that same room and consciousness might highlight something else entirely.

And anger tends to construct more anger, shapes more of the mental formation of anger.

The sense of self is a volitional formation—like anger, like joy. And it can be felt and seen and observed. We can be curious about that experience. The sense of self as a mental formation tends to construct things in its image, we could say, just as anger tends to construct things in its image. Whatever sense of self is arising is constructing our aggregates from that perspective. And this can be seen. We can begin to be curious about when we notice a sense of self, how is it shaping our experience? This will be some of what I talk about.

The five aggregates are always going on. They're always happening, just tumbling on whether we're mindful or not. Consciousness, feeling, perception—these things are meeting experience and recognizing experience and carrying us through. The body is carrying us through our lives. Mental formations are shaping our choices and our actions, whether we are mindful or not.

Mindfulness I understand also as a volitional formation. Its job or its activity is to arise with the aggregates and meet them, to know them. Sometimes it kind of knows all of the aggregates at the same time. If these five fingers are my five aggregates, mindfulness arising can sometimes know the whole experience. Sometimes mindfulness might more hook onto form or feelings; it might be more interested in exploring one or the other of these aggregates.

In terms of the exploration of the sense of self related to the aggregates, there are several teachings here, and we'll see how many of them I get to. One of them is in the discourse called the Anatta Lakkhana Sutta, the discourse on the characteristic of not-self. The Buddha begins by asking his followers about what these aggregates are with respect to the sense of self.

Here's an example. The first thing he points to is the control aspect—that we tend to impute a sense of self

as having control. He says to his followers: "Form is not self. If form were self"—so this is kind of a postulation—"if it were self, then form would not lead itself to affliction. And it would be possible to say of form, 'May my form be thus, may my form not be thus.' But because form is not self, form leads to affliction. It is not possible to say, 'Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus.'"

"Consciousness is not self. If consciousness were self, consciousness would not lend itself to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.' But because consciousness is not self, consciousness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to say, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.'"

So this is pointing to the basic sense—he says, "if form were self." He's speaking to people perhaps who take the sense of self to be that sense of control. And this is a major way we tend to attribute a sense of self: when it feels like we're in control of something. "I'm in control of it." So he points to the fact that these five aspects of experience are not under our control, that the reason for that is because they are not self.

I think often we get caught in struggle around this very aspect of experience. We sit down to meditate, we say we're going to be with the breath or stay with the body, and the mind wanders and we feel like we've failed because we've not been able to control our mindfulness. Here we can stick mindfulness into this sentence: Mindfulness is not self. If mindfulness were self, mindfulness would not lend itself to affliction, and it would be possible to determine of mindfulness, "Let my mindfulness be this, let my mindfulness not be this."

But because mindfulness is not self, mindfulness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to say, "Let my mindfulness be this." We've all suffered over this, haven't we? And the Buddha simply points out that it's not a personal failing. If you can't say, "May my mindfulness be thus," it's the nature of the experience itself.

There's so much evidence for not-self in all aspects of our experience, yet it feels like such a remote thing sometimes, just talking about not-self. What is not-self? It feels so obvious that there's a self. But that's because we're not looking carefully at our experience and seeing what we take to be self—that sense of "I have control" or whatever. Then when we don't have control, we feel like we did something wrong. Instead of that interpretation, the Buddha is saying, no, it's not that you did anything wrong; it's because it's not-self.

So we can see experience when that uncontrollability is happening, when we observe things arising that are just arising. This is evidence for not-self. When we see we can't control that we have a stomachache after eating some food, it's not a personal failing—the body lends itself to affliction. It is not self. We can't simply say, "May the stomachache be gone." We live with the experience.

Now, there is some measure of control that we have, and I think that's why we get caught. When we're hungry, we can eat and the hunger goes away. When we want light to read by, we can turn on a lamp.

There is some measure of control, and I think we misinterpret that as having absolute control—not understanding that when we don't have control, it is simply the nature of experience.

The Buddha goes on in the sutta, the Anattalakkhana Sutta, to point out with each of the aggregates that all of them are impermanent. All conditioned experience, if we look closely, is impermanent. It comes and goes. It's not stable. And because it's impermanent, it is unreliable. It is not a reliable place for lasting happiness.

That's another mistake we make when grasping onto things. When we cling to something, partly our mind has said, "This thing is going to do it for me. I'm going to find happiness by holding onto it." Then that thing goes away, and we feel the suffering of having pinned our hopes on it for our happiness.

This unreliability, the dukkha nature of experience—dukkha can be translated as "unreliable," sometimes as "suffering," and that is indeed the experience sometimes. But what's being pointed to here is not necessarily that experience is always felt as suffering, but that experience is always unreliable. We can't land on experience as something that can be depended upon.

Through this exploration—looking at experience as unreliable and impermanent—the Buddha asks his followers: Does it make sense to call something that is uncontrollable, unreliable, and impermanent a self? He's gone through every aspect of our bodies and minds, all experience that we know, and pointed out that it is all uncontrollable, impermanent, and unreliable. So does it make sense to call any of it self? This is what he asked his followers, and they said no, it doesn't.

I think he was speaking to people for whom blissful, permanent, and controllable was their definition of what self was. He was examining how they defined the sense of self and pointing out that what they took to be self was not self.

We may not think of self as blissful, permanent, or reliable. What do you think of as self? I have my own senses of self—what I think self is. Permanence does weigh in there sometimes. I don't know about blissful. But I think what this part of the teaching is pointing to is to begin to get curious about what it is that we call self. How do we attribute a sense of self? What is it that we're calling self? Get to know what it is that you're calling a sense of self. There are times when the sense of self arises very strongly, and we can get curious about that. What is that experience?

The Buddha had different ways to explore what the sense of self is. With respect to the aggregates, he pointed out that we tend to have four ways of identifying or clinging to a sense of self with each of them—essentially, twenty different flavors of identity view.

I'm not going to go through all of these twenty permutations, but I want to give you a sense of the flavors, just moving through this teaching quickly.

With respect to each of the aggregates, the Buddha says we tend to identify in the first way: "I am the

aggregate." I am body. I am feeling. I am perception. I am mental formation. I am consciousness. That sense of "I am the body" is familiar to me.

Let me name some of the flavors I've personally experienced. That sense of "I am the body." Or "I am the emotion." "I am miserable" — that was one I was quite familiar with, imputing that this is who I am, that this is me. It might also be related to roles and social identities, which are perceptions and mental formations — the sense of "I am a parent" or "a student" or "a sibling." That kind of identification is really an identification with the perception of a role.

The second pattern is: the aggregate is mine. Things belong to me. The body is mine — that one I recognize. Yes, the body is mine. It's mine. Emotions and feelings are mine — that's another very familiar feeling, that sense of ownership, of appropriation. Form is mine in terms of things in the world, that sense of ownership. Ideas are mine — oh, I've suffered so much over ideas being mine. At one point I remember feeling ownership of a word. People were using that word and they were not giving me credit for it. So much suffering from just that possessiveness, that ownership.

The third pattern is: I am inside of the aggregate. This one I've perhaps experienced as feeling like I'm inside the body — maybe that homunculus kind of feeling Greg was pointing to the other day. A little homunculus inside the body, that's me in there, looking out from there. I haven't experienced all these permutations, but just giving you the flavor. Perhaps occasionally in some meditative states, having the sense of the expansiveness of the meditative state, feeling like "I am in consciousness." A feeling of being inside the experience sometimes. So even in those expansive states, there can be a sense of being *in* it.

The fourth pattern is: the aggregate is inside of me. This one is also fairly familiar — the emotions are in me, consciousness is in me.

So this is a pretty complex framework, and it can be useful to reflect on it occasionally. But I'm not going to encourage you to try to remember this or analyze your experience in these terms so much. There's a simpler teaching I've found really useful that takes this whole twenty-part structure and collapses it down into three simple sentences that support an exploration around the sense of self.

This relates to a phrase the Buddha uses around examining our experience. He said that with respect to each aggregate, we should understand: "This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

Taking just those three sentences — not even thinking about the aggregates so much — we can work with them directly. The sense of ownership, "this is not mine" — if we turn it around and consider the sense of self there, that's the ownership self, the appropriation self. That one's pretty obvious. I think that one can be quite clear.

And especially if something gets taken away from us. We walk in and see that our cup has moved, or somebody moved our zafu off of our cushion. There's that sense of appropriation, that sense of "mine." So we can feel that. We can feel, what is that quality of that "mine"? To me, it kind of feels like a gathering in,

like I'm trying to hold all my possessions in or something. That feeling of "mine."

"This I am not"—that reflection, turned around to what the sense of self might be there: "I am this." That, to me, points to that control nature. If you think about the "I am" in a sentence, the "I" at the beginning of a sentence is the agent of the sentence, the subject of the sentence. I am the subject of the sentence. And the subject of the sentence is often the one with agency. So I am the doer. I am the thinker. I am the one who chooses, the one who decides, the one who acts. This one also can be pretty clear at times. We can feel the sense of that control, that feeling of being in control.

That one, to me, feels like a puff. I'm here. I do things. I know things. There are turkeys at Spirit Rock, and the male turkeys in the breeding season—they see a female and they go... *puffs up*. That's what it feels like. That's that "I am, I do, I'm here, I'm going to, I've got agency." So that feeling. Again, be curious about it. You don't have to make an issue about it, but be interested in it.

Then the last one—this one to me is actually one of the more interesting ones to begin to get familiar with, because as we start to really see all of these experiences as processes unfolding, we see the sense of "I am," that doer, that agent, the one who does things. We start to see that actually it's not me doing it; it's the mental formations doing it. We see the arising of an intention and an action that follows. We're sitting for a while. We feel some pressure in our bladder. We notice an intention to get up to relieve that pressure. We stand up, we go. Sometimes we can see that whole thing happening just out of the process nature of our minds. We feel the experience. There's an understanding of what it means. There's a decision that's made. It's not me doing it. We can see all of this arising just as conditions unfolding and see that I didn't make that decision—it happened. It was the mental formations making the decision. Mental formations leading onward.

As we see that, as we start to see that we're not the one who's doing things, sometimes this last level—"this is not myself"—I think of this as the self as the object of the sentence: "This is me." In my practice, on one retreat, I was really starting to see through this lens of the aggregates, seeing I'm not doing any of these. It is just tumbling on. I could see I did not have control over the consciousness of the experience. Consciousness was happening. The mental formations were happening. All of it was just happening. But it felt like it was happening to me. It was not me doing it.

I was not the agent. But there was a sense of being the one impinged upon—helplessly being impinged upon. That sense of self is also a very interesting one to have pointed out, because I think it's a subtler one, a subtler kind.

I tried so hard to see through that. I can't see through that—me, the agent, the doer, trying to see through it. I went and reported this to my teacher and he laughed. "You just notice that it feels like me." Of course that's what he said.

The last piece I'll offer is this: there are so many different experiences of a sense of self. We can start to see

that there are just hundreds of them. There's not one sense of self. We have many different senses of self that arise and pass away. We can start to see them as arising and passing away.

I think many of these senses of self that we have—and Tuari pointed to this in her talk—are often strategies we've learned to help us navigate the impermanent, unreliable nature of the world. So it's almost like we honor them. Thank you for helping me get here. And now let's see if we can be curious about them. Perhaps these strategies are not necessary anymore. Perhaps some strategies are still useful, understanding them as strategies rather than as who I am.

We can honor our senses of self by opening to them with mindfulness and wisdom, familiarizing ourselves with how they act, how they affect our bodies, how they affect our minds. These mental formations, the sense of self—just observing it like you would observe any mental formation. How does it affect the body? How does it affect the mind? What kinds of thoughts does it make happen in our minds? How does it make us act?

Sometimes senses of self can be helpful. A sense of self for me around investigation was really helpful for many years. And then at some point I began to see the suffering of holding on to that identity. So it was useful for a long time. And then at some point I began to notice the suffering of clinging to it—the suffering of clinging to being a good practitioner.

But mostly I want to encourage again, like my last talk, curiosity. Perhaps all my talks are about curiosity. Honoring our experience. Letting wisdom help us to see the nature of our experience. And wisdom does the letting go. We don't have to let go of our senses of self. We need to understand them. This is the encouragement of the Buddha: understand our suffering, understand our aggregates, understand our senses of self. The understanding will lead to freedom.

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