The Five Aggregates

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:04:52

This evening I'd like to talk about a subject that's come up a couple of times at least in the dharma talks, and perhaps in the instructions, but we haven't covered it in much detail yet—the topic of the five aggregates.

The title itself sounds a little dry, technical, perhaps boring. The term "aggregate," which translates the Pali term *khandha*, doesn't resonate with us very much, especially in terms of direct experience. When I first encountered this teaching, the first image that came to mind was a big lump of rock. The geological term "aggregate" was what I thought of, and I wondered, what does this have to do with anything?

But this Pali term *khandha* is actually not a very technical term. It's an everyday, ordinary term in the Pali language, meaning something like heap, bundle, or pile. So this teaching on the five aggregates is essentially the Buddha looking at our experience and dividing it up into five heaps, saying that everything in our experience can be found in one of these five heaps. This teaching is really about looking at our experience—it's a teaching around how we can explore our experience. I think all of the Buddhist teachings were very practical. No matter how technical they sound, they always come back to how we can explore our direct experience, and this teaching is no exception.

The five aggregates are: the aggregate of body, which is basically the physical aspect of our experience; and then four aggregates relating to our mental experience. I actually think this teaching is particularly interesting because it explores our experience from both physical and mental perspectives, but it really looks at our mental experience in a fairly finely grained way. There's one physical aggregate—the aggregate of form—and the other four relate to our mental experience.

We can contrast this with the teaching on the six sense bases, which is kind of the opposite in a way. In the six sense base teaching, we look at our body through its five aspects—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—and then the sense base of the mind. In that teaching, the body is given a kind of emphasis; how the perceptual and knowing faculties work through the body is highlighted. In the five aggregates, the emphasis is reversed, and the exploration focuses more on the mental aspects of our experience.

So the five aggregates are: form, the body basically; feeling, the felt aspect of our experience, whether things are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; perception, the recognizing aspect of our experience; mental formations, the volitional aspect of our experience; and consciousness, the knowing aspect of our experience.

I'll go into some detail on these—what they are and how we can actually see them as experiences in our

moment-to-moment experience. But first I'd like to talk a little bit about the aggregates themselves, just an overview.

There are two ways that these five heaps are described in the texts, in the suttas. Form is defined as this body, the aspects of the physicality of the body. Feeling is defined as the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral aspect of experience. Perception is defined as the recognition that we make, the concepts that happen in our minds. Mental formations encompass all of the mental activity that happens in our minds. And consciousness is the knowing.

So each aggregate is defined both in terms of what we experience and as a process. There are actually two definitions given in the suttas for each of these aggregates—one that essentially describes what we notice in our experience, and another describing how it happens, the process within our experience. These aggregates cover both sides.

Essentially, these processes of body and mind cover any experience you have. Any experience whatsoever can be found within these five aggregates. And these processes are continually going on, day and night. Whether we are awake or asleep, whether we are mindful or not, these processes just continue. Whether we are mindful or not, the mind recognizes things and knows things and feels things. The body experiences heat and cold. It's all happening all the time.

During this talk I'd like to explore both sides of the understanding of each aggregate—the what, essentially what is understood or experienced in body, in feeling, in perception, and so forth, and also the process, how it's understood as a process.

But first I'd like to say something about why. Why bother to understand this? What is the point? It still sounds perhaps a little dry and technical.

First, because these aggregates include the entirety of our experience, they are an excellent framework for beginning to understand our experience, particularly the mental realm. The distinctions of how our mind does what it does are very well described in this teaching. And it points us to the actuality of what we are experiencing. If we can begin to see our experience through this framework, through understanding these processes at work, we begin to see them simply as processes. It begins to undermine our identification with these processes.

And in fact, that is another main reason to understand them. The Buddha highlighted these five aggregates as being the primary ways that we cling, the ways that we identify.

In fact, he equated, in a sense, the five aggregates of clinging with our suffering. And that is, in one definition, the definition of the first noble truth. So through understanding these five aggregates, we come to an understanding of this first noble truth of suffering. Through understanding how we cling to them—that we cling to them—we begin to see too that this clinging itself is also simply a process. A process that goes on within these aggregates themselves. Clinging is found in the aggregate of volitional

formations, the volitional aspect of our experience.

So we're encouraged to understand these heaps, these areas of experience, to get to know them really well so we can see how they serve as magnets for clinging, magnets for suffering.

The Buddha also highlighted this teaching in terms of the process of selfing—this confused, misperceived aspect of our experience. He called it "I-making" and "mine-making," and he noted that each of these aggregates particularly collects this I-making or mine-making. So understanding these aggregates is a good way for us to begin to see how we create this notion of self and believe in it. We can begin to actually deconstruct this notion of self through exploring these five aggregates.

One teacher, Bhikkhu Anālayo, who is a wonderful practitioner-scholar monk and a great researcher into the Pali Canon, wrote a book that I highly recommend if you haven't read it yet. It's called *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*—a modern-day commentary on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness. In that book, he talks about the aggregates and says that from the unenlightened perspective—the perspective from which we normally view our experience—body is where I am, feeling is how I am, perception is what I am recognizing, mental formations are why I am acting, and consciousness is whereby I am experiencing, the means or mode by which I experience things. So these are five ways that we tend to identify.

I'd like to describe each of these aggregates in turn, and then talk a little bit about how we can actually begin to explore this in our experience.

The form aggregate, in terms of a process, is described in terms of our subjective experience. In one sutta, the Buddha says—and it's a little bit hard to translate this particular line—but in terms of the process of form, he says, "It deforms. That's why it is called form." The Pali terms involve a word play that the Buddha is using. The term for form is *rūpa*, and the term he uses for deforms is *ruppati*, which is not etymologically related to *rūpa* but sounds like it. So he's making a pun, basically. *Ruppati* means something like breaks or gets injured or spoils. What he's saying is that we experience form because of things that impact our world, our body—that the form element is experienced through how things contact us, how the world contacts us. So it's in terms of subjective experience that this aggregate is defined.

This is about looking at our physical experience, the physicality of our experience itself, in an elemental way—in terms of both the process and the "what" of experience. The "what" of form is defined as the four great elements: earth, air, fire, and water, as well as sight, sound, smells, tastes, and touches. So, for instance, a bell has form—it's got earth element—and the sound waves are also form, but they are experienced only because they impact this body. It really is an experiential understanding of form that this teaching is pointing to.

We come into contact with our physical experience through the elements: vibration, tingling, and pulsing being air element; heat and coolness being the fire element; hardness and weight being earth element;

and fluidity being water element. The teaching on form is about coming into contact with the actuality of our felt experience, the actual sense of form—not our ideas or concepts about form.

This exploration is a really good place to begin distinguishing mental and physical experience. So often when I talk to somebody who's just begun this practice, I'll say, "Tell me what you're experiencing." In a practice discussion, we'll be sitting there and I'll ask them to tell me what they're experiencing. Often they'll say something like, "Well, I'm experiencing my shoulder," or "I'm experiencing my stomach." But that is experiencing through a lens of concept, because we can't feel "shoulder." We feel pressure or tension or tightness or aching or pulling, but shoulder is a concept. So this exploration of form is about coming into the actual experience of form.

So then there are the mental aggregates, the four mental aggregates. I'm going to describe these briefly here for now, and then I'll come back to them in talking about how to see them in our actual experience.

Feeling is the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, constantly happening in our experience. The other aspect of this teaching of the aggregates is that they all come up every single moment of experience. Unless we're in some kind of formless jhana, we're experiencing body, feeling, perception, knowing, and mental formation in every single moment. And so every single moment of experience is colored by this feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and we can recognize that. I talked about this the other morning, so that's the what of feeling. The how of feeling is the process by which we recognize pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—the process by which that happens in our minds, the mental process responsible for sensing and feeling.

Then there's perception. Perception is the process of recognizing experience, a kind of pattern matching where we see, based on what we have known in our past, what we've seen over and over again, and we come up with a label or a name for this experience that we're having. So you can see the color and the form of this thing that I'm holding up, and you will recognize it as a glass. The perception takes in all of these—there are layers of perception. Part of the perceptual process is noticing the color and the shape of this thing, and part of the perceptual process layers on top of that and recognizes that it is a glass. And you know this because you've seen a lot of glasses. Now, you haven't seen maybe this particular glass—you've seen a lot of ones that look a lot like this lately, but maybe not this particular one. But because you've seen them, this process of recognition happens.

This is an extremely helpful process. We couldn't really navigate our lives without this process of recognition. And there are some very sophisticated ways that the mind does this, particularly around recognizing faces. We will recognize the face of our mother like that—it's not going to take us any time at all. So this process of perception serves us really well, and it is not something that we need to stop or need to have any judgment about. It's simply the way our mind works. The difficulty comes in not seeing that this is a process of mind. Essentially, we conflate or confuse the concept with reality, and I'll talk about that more in a little bit. So this perceptual process is a second kind of mental activity.

Then there's the knowing process, consciousness. This is just a very simple meeting of experience. In the suttas it's described as just the bare, simple knowing. It talks about six kinds of consciousness: consciousness of seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, touching, and consciousness of mind objects. So just a very simple, basic knowing of experience.

Before I move on to the fourth mental aggregate, I want to talk a little bit about these three—feeling, perception, and consciousness—as a group. My way of understanding these three is that they are the basic processes that meet our experience. We feel experience, we conceptualize it, and we know it. It's pretty fundamental to the way we navigate our world. It's actually kind of hard to tease these three apart. In fact, there was a person in the time of the Buddha that had this question about how to tease these three apart, and he asked a question about it. I'll read this to you.

The questioner says, "Are feeling, perception, and consciousness—are these states conjoined or disjoined? Is it possible to separate these states from each other in order to describe the difference between them?" And the answer is, "These states are conjoined. It is impossible to separate these states from the others in order to describe the difference between them. For what one feels, that one perceives. And what one perceives, that one cognizes."

So these three really come together to meet our experience.

We can recognize them independently, but we cannot experience feeling without having the knowing and the perceiving happening. We cannot experience perceiving without having the knowing and the feeling happening. It's like there are three facets of a prism. You cannot take one of the facets off—you have to have all of the facets there. So we can look through one of those facets and get the flavor of feeling, the flavor of perceiving, the flavor of knowing. We can distinguish them, but we cannot separate them out.

Then there is the fourth mental aggregate, the aggregate of volitional formation. The Pali term for this is *s ankhara*. And even in the Pali, this has two meanings. It means both what is put together and that which puts together. So it has both an active and a passive connotation to it—both the what is put together and how that putting together happens. Essentially both sides of this are found in this aggregate of volitional formation.

The result, the *what*, of the process of volitional formation is the many mental activities involving volition, choice, intention. This includes emotions, thoughts, states of concentration, bliss, joy, peace. It includes afflictive emotions, reactive emotions, anger, irritation, lust. This is a really big category. It includes pretty much everything that is not feeling and perception. The process of volitional formation is that which shapes our experience.

I want to read a little bit of the Buddha's words here, because he had a great way of putting things. He says, "Why do we call them volitional formations?" And again, he's using a pun here, so it doesn't translate very well, but: "Why do we call them volitional formations? They construct the conditioned. That's why

they're called volitional formations. And what is the condition that they construct? They construct conditioned form as form. They construct conditioned feeling as feeling. They construct conditioned perception as perception. They construct conditioned volitional formations as volitional formations. They construct conditioned consciousness as consciousness."

So this is saying that all five aggregates are being constructed. The volitional formations are responsible for the construction going forward of all of our experience, of all of the aggregates.

How does this work? How can we understand this? Let's take a simple example, like anger. The experience of anger itself is the volitional formation of anger. There's a choice in there. It may not be a conscious choice to become angry. But as I pointed out in my talk last week, when I saw anger coming up, when I saw a thought in the mind and I saw the mind wanting to jump on that thought and think more thoughts to get angry, I saw how that anger was intentional. I saw how there is a choice in there. So the anger itself has this intentional quality to it.

Now, how does this construct the aggregates? How does this impact the other aggregates? Well, if you think about how anger works, when anger is functioning, it distorts perhaps our face. It perhaps brings up physical experience—heat and pressure in the body, tightness, clenching in the jaw, contraction in the stomach. So anger has this impact on form. The feeling aggregate typically becomes unpleasant when anger is present. Perception—we tend to recognize or perceive things through this lens of anger when anger is present.

For example, from my own practice: I was doing a metta practice at one point, and those of you who do metta practice may notice at times that the opposite of metta comes up. We may talk about this in the metta practice on Tuesday nights—when the opposite of metta comes up, it's not necessarily a problem. It's the purification of our hearts that metta draws to the surface, that which is not metta: anger. So I was doing a long period of metta practice over a month, and from time to time I found myself in a really aversive, angry state. One of my jobs during that retreat was to do the dishwashing late at night. I went down to do the dishwashing while I was in one of these aversive states, and everything that I saw was just—

wrong and bad. I was doing the dishes and I was having a little trouble closing the machine door, and my thought was an explosion of, "Who designed this stupid machine anyway?"

So you can see how anger influences the way we perceive our experience. When I was feeling metta, even if I had trouble closing the machine, it wasn't like an explosion and a berating of the person who designed it. When anger is present, it influences how we perceive things, how we recognize things, what we perceive.

Our consciousness is also directed by this state of anger—it's like a filter. We may be conscious of certain things and completely unconscious of other things when we are in such a state. It's as if we are attuned to

picking up things that affirm this state of anger, and we will completely miss things that are not in line with it. These volitional formations can completely influence what we are actually conscious of.

And having anger tends to construct more anger. So all five of the aggregates are created out of this volitional formation. This is why it is so important to keep track of our intentions—these intentions that James talked about last night. When our mind is motivated and supported by peace and calm and generosity and kindness, it constructs our world more skillfully.

So how can we use this teaching as a support for investigating our direct experience? We'll go through each of these again and look at each one.

The bodily experience—looking at our experience through the actual lens, the actual felt sense of body. Not the concept of head, of hand, of foot, but as I say these now, I'm going to name quite a few elemental kinds of experience. See if you can touch into these in your experience.

The earth element: heaviness, hardness, density, weight. It's a sense of your body, the kind of weight of your body. Earth sitting on earth.

The air element—this is a big area of experience, at least in my experience. There's a lot of different air element sensations: vibration, tingling, pulsing, pressure, movement, pulling, pushing, tension. All of these are air elements.

Fire element is pretty obvious: heat. That's what I'm experiencing right now. Not too much coolness at this moment. We'll get some of that later on.

The water element—this one is a little harder to touch into at times. You might have a sense, a little bit of perhaps some stickiness or some moisture on the surface of your body. The water element is about fluidity, cohesion, liquidity. One way to contact the water element: blow into your hands and then push them together, and then slowly let them come apart, and you'll feel stickiness there. That stickiness is a manifestation of the water element.

So we can experience our physicality in these ways, the touch experience. And then there is form within the realm of sight—the shape and color that comes in is also in this realm of form. In the realm of sound, the pitch and tone that hits our eardrum is also in the realm of form. In taste, there's the bitter, sweet, salty, pungent, sour flavors that our tongue is designed to experience.

All of these take us below the level of concept to the actual experience of form. It's actually hard sometimes to experience this actual physical experience because we usually, in our normal way of living, experience things through our concepts. So it's hard, for example, to eat an orange and not taste "orange." What's actually experienced there is a combination of sweet and sour, the feeling of liquid across the tongue, the tartness and the coolness. There's just this mixture of experience that becomes "orange" like that.

So in this exploration, we quickly move to that recognition of what is experienced—hand or orange or chair—rather than the form or the shape and color of our experience.

It's really hard in the realm of seeing to break this down—to look out at this room and not see men and women sitting there, but to just see a pastiche of form and color. It's happened to me rarely on retreat where that occurs, where I turn my attention to something and it's just a wash of random color blotches, and then suddenly it pops into view. Oh, that's what that is. But that's not a normal place for our experience to go. We typically see things through this filter of perception. So this teaching begins to bring us more closely into contact with the actual physical experience, and we begin to recognize at least when concept is coming into play. I'll talk more about concept in just a minute.

The mental aggregates, the processes of the mind—it's easiest to begin understanding these processes by seeing the result of the process, by observing the result. So by seeing and recognizing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, for example, we start to see the process. We can begin to see the process of how feeling is felt.

I'm going to start this exploration by talking about mental formation because that's really the easiest one to see. You've all seen a lot of this. This is where we see our anger, our frustration, our irritation, our doubt, our confusion, our calm, our peace, our happiness, our interest. This is where a lot of our experience is found.

As we begin to see these—this "what" of our mental formations, our volitional formations—we start to see how they shape our experience, as I talked about a few minutes ago. If anger is coming up, we can begin to see how it impacts these other areas of experience. We see how it shapes our experience. This is the process of volitional formation, this shaping aspect.

Seeing this, especially around mental formation—seeing how they are a process—really begins to undercut the identification with the result of that process. Seeing that anger is a process begins to undercut the identification with anger. One of the main reasons why seeing them as a process helps us is because identification tends to solidify things. It stops them. As we see things as a process, this process of stopping and solidifying doesn't hold much truth anymore. We see through it.

Another way to explore the mental formations is to look at one of the aspects James was talking about last night: this moment-to-moment intention in our experience. The key defining characteristic of mental formations is that they have an intention associated with them. There's a choice or a volition associated with these. Beginning to see how intention works in your experience is a great exploration around this aggregate of mental formations.

As James mentioned last night, this is easiest to see in our bodily processes. We can particularly notice that we're going to move before we move when making major changes of posture. When you're sitting, before you get up from the sitting, there will be an intention to stand. You can know that you're going to stand

before you stand. Actually, you can know that you're going to move before you move, you can know you're going to speak before you speak, and you can know you're going to think before you think. This knowing—this "about to," this recognizing, "I'm about to move"—is catching this factor of intention.

We can notice this even if you're having a still sitting. If there's an itch, for instance, you may notice the intention to move to scratch the itch before you move. In seeing that intention, the intention itself is neutral, but what accompanies it is going to give the direction to the shaping of the future. If it's accompanied by greed, aversion, or delusion, the shaping is going to head in that direction, towards suffering. If it's accompanied by non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion, the shaping will be skillful. It will head us more towards happiness.

In this noticing of intention, we can often see—at least when we recognize "I'm about to move, I'm about to shift my posture"—we can see the motivation that's associated with it and begin to choose or decide: maybe I shouldn't follow through on that. How do I want to shape my experience?

We also see in looking at this that intention comes up—intention arises—and it conditions the next moment. There's an arising of an intention to stand, and then the standing happens. The intention prods us into action.

When we actually start to see this in our moment-to-moment experience, when we start to see this really clearly, it begins to undercut one of the major ways that we identify a self. We have a particularly strong identification of self around being the one who chooses. This is a big area of selfing. Who else would be choosing? But choice chooses. Intention intends. And seeing this in our experience—when we're sitting, we see this impulse, this urge to stand, and then we watch the standing—we see this is just unfolding. We can actually see this happening without there being an "I" doing the choosing.

We also start to see that the choice itself is conditioned.

Suppose you've been driving in a car for a really long time—three or four hours—and you don't have any water with you. That condition of driving for so long without something to drink is going to condition the body to get thirsty. So thirst will arise. That thirst arising conditions the desire or the wish to satisfy it. And so the intention or the plan is formed to stop to get a drink.

All of this just unfolds. There doesn't actually have to be somebody there deciding or making this choice of "I need to pull over and stop." It will unfold on its own. The condition of body not having a drink for a long time conditions the thirst—body conditions body. The thirst conditions the desire to alleviate it—body conditions mind. That desire to alleviate the thirst conditions a plan of action: "I'm going to pull over and stop"—mind conditioning mind. And that plan of action conditions action in the body—mind conditioning body.

It's just a flow of body conditioning body, conditioning mind, conditioning body, conditioning mind, conditioning mind. There's no one doing it. And seeing this, actually witnessing the unfolding of this in

your experience, will really begin to undercut this identification with mental formations.

Then there's the feeling process—the process of experiencing pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Again, there's simply the recognition of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral in our experience. And then there's the exploration of feeling itself: how feeling comes to be.

I had an interesting experience of this on one long retreat—I think it was my first long retreat. I was having a meal, one of the simple teas, and there were apples and bean dip. I think that was all we had that evening. I took a bite of the apple, and it was really pleasant—one of the best apples I'd ever had. It was just about this time of year, fresh and crisp. I took this bite, and a delightful, tingling experience went through my whole body. Pleasant.

So I noticed the pleasantness of it and took another bite—pleasant. Then I took a bite of the bean dip, which had a different flavor and texture. It wasn't quite as pleasant as the apple. Then I took another bite of the apple, and the contrast between the bean dip and the apple made the flavor of the apple all the more pleasant.

I was just noticing. After a while of taking multiple bites of the apple, the pleasantness wasn't quite as pleasant. Then I'd have some bean dip, and the pleasantness would come back in the apple. Over the course of the meal, the mouth seemed to get used to this whole thing, and it wasn't nearly so pleasant.

I began to see how the feeling that comes up is a result of conditions. In that case, the pleasantness was more pleasant having the apple after the bean dip than after multiple bites of apple, because of the contrast between them. Same apple, different conditions in the mouth created different experiences of pleasant.

So we can explore how feeling comes to be. That simple exercise actually showed me how feeling is a result of our choices—a result of karma. How we feel things is shaped by our volitional formations. I saw that directly in that exploration. In your own exploration of *vedanā*, you can begin to investigate how feeling comes to be.

It's also a very powerful place to watch the process of feeling within the whole flow of how suffering comes to be. I talked about this when I discussed feeling the other morning. A pleasant experience tends to condition a liking—a mental formation of liking. That liking further conditions a wanting, a feeling of "I need this," followed by greed.

Watching how feeling plays into this whole cycle is another very powerful exploration of the feeling process—seeing its place, its role in the creation of suffering.

In being able to recognize feeling in its own experience, as I said, it can kind of short-circuit this almost nearly automatic movement to craving. We can just know: pleasant is pleasant. It doesn't have to move to wanting and needing and grasping. We can just know: unpleasant is unpleasant. It doesn't have to move to

"I hate this, I can't stand this."

Then there's the process of perception—the process of recognizing something. I've found this to be a fascinating exploration. This is actually one of my favorite places to explore in the aggregates. It may be a little hard to see initially, but one of the easiest places to explore it is in the realm of sound, at least in my experience.

You'll hear something. There's the contact of the experience of hearing. And then, when the mind is pretty quiet and calm, you may notice that very shortly after that experience of hearing, there's going to be a name set in the mind, or an image perhaps. There's a sound, and then the word "car" appears in the mind, or an image of a car appears in the mind. Or there's the sound of a sneeze, and then an image of a person sneezing appears in your mind. That's the process of perception. There's the sound, and then there's the recognition of the sound.

This is a pretty clear distinction between the two. You can pick up on the actual experience of hearing and recognize that it is different from the label or image that goes through the mind. So that's a place to explore this, a place to play with it.

Another place I've had fun playing with this is in watching the mind try to recognize something that's unfamiliar. I saw this happen last night. I walked into my room and there's a device sitting in the window with a cord hanging down from it that's all wrapped up. I walked in the room and the first thing my mind went was: huge spider. This black cord was there. Then the mind recognized: wire, cord. I could see how the mind misperceived immediately. The mind was trying to recognize something that wasn't very familiar as I walked into that room.

You can sometimes see your mind trying on various explorations of what something is. On one retreat, I walked into a very dim room, and there was something in the dark on the other side of the room. I watched my mind go through several things. The first thing it said was: grotesque being. And then—it took about twenty seconds—it came up with: vase of flowers. I could really see this process of perception trying to recognize. This is something our minds will just naturally do. They'll keep trying until they come up with a fit that feels right. "Ah, vase of flowers. Okay, that's what that is."

In this exploration, we can actually see that this process is prone to mistake. We also start to watch and see that we can easily confuse the concept with reality. Just play with this and see. Especially when perception is making a mistake, it gets a little easier to observe. I had one experience where the mind was confused and was identifying a sound as a pig, but then I discovered that it was actually bats. I could really see how the mind had created a whole story around pigs that were being slaughtered. There was a reality there. But when I found out they were bats, my whole reality changed.

Through this exploration of perception, we can start to see how we mistake concept for reality. This is a huge place where we get caught. In fact, the whole process of selfing—the whole process of identifying a

self—is a misperception. It's within this realm of perception, and the fact that perception often makes mistakes, that we delude ourselves into believing in self.

Then there's the aspect of consciousness, of knowing—the process of knowing. Every experience arises with both the experience and the knowing of it. They come up together. And it's possible to see either side of that experience. Most of the time, in our normal way of experiencing things, we're paying attention to what we are knowing—the qualities, the features of what we are knowing. We're not so aware of the knowing itself. But they both come up together, and we can recognize that knowing is happening. It's a pretty subtle experience. It's not something we can try to do necessarily, but your mind will naturally, from time to time, move between what is known and the fact of knowing.

This kind of exploration is definitely not something to do. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says, "Nothing I tell you is anything to do. I'm just giving you information, and that information may inform you so that you can then see things in a different way." So this is along those lines in terms of information. The mind can recognize the knowing aspect of experience.

One way I've explored this, or one way I've seen this more clearly in my own experience, is by noticing when there's something unpleasant happening—aversion, for instance. Aversion is happening in my experience, and the aversion itself is unpleasant. I discovered this on one retreat. I was noticing the aversion, noticing the unpleasantness of it, and then at some point the mind just shifted to: aversion is known. And the whole experience shifted. The knowing feeling—and I'm not sure whether it was the knowing itself or the mindfulness—had a quality of neutrality to it. So the experience really shifted. I could really clearly see this; I could switch back to knowing the aversion and really feel the unpleasantness of it, and then shift to aversion is known, and I could feel the shift to more neutrality.

So this is a way to explore it. Actually, even using the label—"aversion is known" or "experience is known," whatever experience is known—can begin to point us to this aspect of knowing.

The last piece I'll put out there is that, as I said earlier, these aggregates are happening all the time. Whether we're mindful or not, all of these experiences are happening. Mindfulness fits in as a volitional formation; mindfulness itself falls within that aspect of volitional formation. When mindfulness comes into being, one of the ways to explore these experiences of the aggregates is to see that mindfulness is kind of like a mirror. It reflects what's happening. As mindfulness comes into being, it is already reflecting these five processes that are already happening. These aggregates are already going on, and when mindfulness comes in, it can just notice what's already happening—just notice the feeling that's already happening, what's being recognized that's already happening.

This has been a really big help for me in my practice: the recognition that when mindfulness comes back, I don't have to do anything. There's already plenty going on. The aggregates have already been doing their thing when I wasn't mindful, and mindfulness comes in and can just meet this moment. This is what's happening now. Just waking up to what is already taking place. No need to construct anything, no need to

do anything. There's already plenty happening. Just notice what's obvious in that moment.

This exploration will ultimately help us to see how these processes function and begin to loosen that grip of identification that we have.

So let's just sit for a moment.

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