# Body and Mind

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:00:31

This morning in the hall there was a question about how to explore disidentification with pain. Bhante referred to recognizing that the body and mind are processes, that there are processes at work. He mentioned the five aggregates and said somebody would give a talk about that at some point. And that's tonight.

I'm not going to try to do a detailed talk on the five aggregates, but rather talk about them in terms of body and mind processes, and in particular how these processes come together to create suffering, to create our reactivity.

The five bodily and mental processes are form or body, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. I'm going to talk about these in a way that hopefully won't seem like they're just concepts, but rather how we can experience these or know these as processes in our direct experience. Because that's where the freedom comes—from actually witnessing our body and mind as processes. This is how disidentification begins to happen. When the mind understands that things are process, it begins to naturally disidentify with them.

While I'm exploring this from the perspective of reactivity and how reactivity is created in the mind, I want to be really clear that these five processes are at work all the time in our experience, whether wholesome experience is happening or unwholesome experience is happening. The experience of being mindful, knowing what's happening in the moment, the creation of concentration—all of this is the five aggregates at work too. And yet we do often identify through the process of reactivity, so that's where I'd like to explore this topic tonight.

In particular, I'd also like to come at this from the perspective of seeing if we can start to tease apart processes of body from processes of mind. I mentioned on the first evening that one aspect of wise mindfulness is to begin to tease apart or tease away things that might be confused with each other, so that we're very clear about what we're looking at. Sometimes when we're exploring the experience of body, it seems like we're exploring the body, but actually it's all mixed up with whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, whether we like it or don't like it. We get it all confused, and beginning to tease apart what body is and what mind is can be a really helpful doorway to understanding these mental processes.

When I first heard about the five aggregates, it seemed like something totally abstract. And yet these processes are very observable. We can know them and experience them and begin to see our experience in terms of these processes.

So the place I'd like to begin is with a familiarity with what the body is. Familiarity with bodily experience can help us sort out when we're experiencing bodily sensations and when we are relating through mental processes.

We've covered this a couple of times now, and Bhante talked about it this morning—the actual bodily sensations. We often relate to our bodily experience through ideas about the body, through concepts like hand or foot or shoulder. And yet what's actually happening is a much more elemental level of sensation. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha described this elemental level of experience in terms of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water.

Let me explore these sensations with you now, as a kind of guided meditation, to experience bodily sensations through these doorways of earth, air, fire, and water.

First, earth element. This is the aspect of experience that feels somewhat solid, that has a solidity to it. Sensations of earth are sensations like heaviness, density, hardness or softness. In your experience right now, you might notice hardness where your buttocks contacts your chair or cushion or bench. That's an aspect of earth element. You might have access to the sense of weight, just the sense of mass of the body—earth sitting on earth, that weightiness. There might be a sense of the solidity of the bones, the structure of the skeleton. In our direct experience, we can contact these sensations related to earth element.

Then there's air element, which involves sensations connected with movement—tingling, vibration, pulsing, movement, pulling, pushing, tension, expansion, contraction, any sensations associated with movement. As you breathe, feeling the movement of the chest or abdomen, that's air element. If you put your attention in your hands right now, you may have a sense of tingling or pulsing or vibration. You may be able to feel that more generally through the body as well. This quality of movement—sensations that have a quality of movement—is a manifestation of air element.

Then there's fire element: temperature, heat, coolness, everything all along that range. Just now, notice what is your sense of the temperature of your body. Sometimes it's interesting—by putting your hand on your cheek, you can get a difference in temperature. You might notice hands cooler and cheeks warmer, or vice versa. This aspect of our bodily experience, temperature, is fire element.

And then there's water element.

Any kind of moisture. This is most obvious perhaps in perspiration or in saliva. It can also be known in another way—you might blow into your hands and press them together. Blowing into your hands adds a little moisture. So press your hands together and then slowly let them pull apart, just really slowly. You may experience stickiness. That's an aspect of water element, that stickiness. If the moisture weren't there, the stickiness would not be there. So when you're walking, if you walk on bare feet and feel your foot stick to the floor, that's water element.

As we explore our bodily experience, the touch sensations of the body, we begin to notice this elemental level of experience. We're learning the language of the body in this way. This is how the body—one of the ways the body communicates with us—through this sensation level of experience.

As we get familiar with the sensation level of experience, we can start to, in counterpoint or in contrast to this actual sensation level, begin to distinguish and recognize that a lot of what's going on in our experience is mental. The physical and mental are so interwoven they're sometimes hard to tell apart. But as we get really familiar with this very bare elemental level of experience, we can start to tease apart body and mind. Body process from mental process.

Why is it helpful to do that? Why would it be helpful? Partly because it shows us that our body and mind are processes. And as Bhante mentioned this morning, recognizing experience in its process nature helps us to see and recognize that there is just this unending flow of cause and effect, cause and effect.

Experience in the body is a cause that produces a result, an effect in the mind. We stub our toe—physical experience of throbbing and aching—and the mind responds to that in various ways. I'm sure you all have your own way of responding to something like that. So the experience of the body is a process and results in something happening in the mind. This happens all the time.

Processes in the mind result in physical experience in the body. It's not a one-way street. We experience an emotion—anger, joy—and the body experiences sensation. With anger, in my experience, anger has a feeling of pressure, of increasing pressure and heat. Joy has a quality of lightness and kind of uplifting, bubbling or vibrating sensations in the body. Experience in the mind produces result and effect in the body.

So we start to see this interwoven set of processes. We begin to understand, watching this, seeing it as process—we begin to understand that it is simply a process. There's no one here particularly running the show. No one here deciding which process to start and which process to respond with. It's kind of running itself.

And we also start to recognize just how the structure of reactivity is put into place through watching these processes of body and mind work together. That's the exploration I'd like to look at tonight—how reactivity is created through the interplay of these processes.

Having the grounding in recognizing body sensation, we can start to look at what our responses to body sensations are. The most obvious area of mental process that's the easiest to see is emotion. We have an experience in our body—we're chopping vegetables and cut ourselves with a knife. There's that experience of the body. There is actual sensation happening there. And then the mind may react. It may turn into a berating or an aversive energy. It may be curious.

I remember at one point I was doing a self-retreat at home and I cut my finger pretty badly. I was kind of far into the retreat, and so I was like, "Wow, that's interesting. Looks like... hmm, better find somebody to

take me to the hospital." So I wrapped it up, put pressure on it. It was five, six o'clock in the morning, but I rang my neighbor's doorbell. I said, "I cut my finger really badly. I think I need to go to the hospital." And she said, "Don't panic." I don't know whether she was joking or not. But it was just like, "Wow, that's interesting what she's doing."

So, you know, sometimes it could be that the mind is actually pretty calm when something like that happens. There is the body sensation and a response. The physical experience can result in a mental response, and these are two different things. It's really helpful to recognize them as different things.

Often an unpleasant or painful physical sensation will result in an aversive reaction in the mind. And that experience—the physical experience and the mental reaction—are different things. It's really helpful to recognize that.

And likewise with emotions, the other direction of the relationship between body and mind. Really helpful to know the difference between the emotion and the impact that emotion has on the body, to not conflate the physical experience in the body with the emotion itself.

This is actually a really helpful exploration. At one point on a retreat—it was a three-month course, and I don't remember exactly when, probably fairly far in, I think in the second half—I was waiting for an interview. I had noticed that very often waiting for interviews, I became anxious. Is this familiar? It's a pretty common response. You haven't spoken in three days, you've got fifteen minutes, and it feels like a high-pressure situation in that context.

So I was waiting for my interview and feeling this quivering in the body. I was using noting at that point, noting the experiences: anxiety, anxiety, anxiety is happening, anxiety. I sat there noting that, and the interview ahead of me went on for a really long time, so I got to hang out with this for quite a while—ten minutes or so.

What was curious to me was that usually by that point in the retreat, when I really met something with mindfulness, things started to shift and change. Something happened as I explored it; it didn't stay static. But this experience stayed kind of static. I just kept noting: okay, anxiety, anxiety, wow, anxiety, anxiety, okay, anxiety.

At some point, noticing that there wasn't much shifting happening, I got more curious about the actual sensations in the body. I started exploring: what are those sensations? Wow, there's quivering, and it's like rapid movement up the body, this shaking, quivering feeling moving rapidly, rising through the body.

As I touched into the actual physical experience, I recognized that what was happening was rapture, not anxiety. The mind had confused the physical sensations of quivering and the context I was in—waiting for an interview—and had decided anxiety was what was happening. Because I was recognizing it through the lens of interpreting it as anxiety, I think it wasn't allowing the experience to really move. When I got more interested in what the actual sensation was, then it became more clear to me what was actually

going on.

This is a case of really starting to tease apart physical experience from mental experience. Many emotions, actually—very early in my practice, one teacher mentioned something, and I didn't quite understand what he was saying at the time, but he said, "I've noticed that lust and rage have very similar bodily sensations." If you're in a particular situation, it can be easy to confuse or misassign a particular bodily sensation to a given emotion because there are some similar experiences. Sometimes it's helpful to just recognize what actually is the body sensation. Heaviness around the heart—that's an experience. We lay something over it like, "Oh, that means I'm sad." Maybe, maybe not. Be willing to enter into and explore the actual physical sensations.

I want to just remind you at this point that this aspect of the mental processes of emotions is in the realm of what in the aggregates is mental formation. Emotions are found in the aggregate of mental formations. Emotions, particularly reactive emotions, are found in this category—anger, confusion, frustration, anxiety—all of those are found in this category of mental formations.

But this is not all that this aspect of mental formations is. In fact, there are states of mind or processes of mind, I should say, in that category of mental formation that we wouldn't even call emotions. Things like mindfulness is a mental formation. Concentration is a mental formation. Tranquility is a mental formation.

I just want to broaden the lens here. I'm not going to talk about mental formations in detail tonight, and I think somebody else will at some point offer a more detailed five aggregates talk. But just to remind you that the five aggregates are not simply about looking at reactivity. A subtler level of mental formation is liking and not liking. This is still in the realm of mental formations, and yet it's a bit subtler than the emotional realm.

And sometimes liking and not liking is a little more closely intertwined with the sensation level of experience, counterpointing bodily sensation and mental sensation. The experience itself—the physical experience—and whether we like it or don't like it are different things. We suffer around liking and not liking, sometimes precisely because they're subtler. They're not the big reactive emotions. They're not anger and aversion and major wanting. It's more like, "Well, I like that. I don't like that." It's quiet enough that sometimes we don't actually recognize the liking and not liking as a separate thing happening in our experience. We may just brush by it. It might not even be clearly noticed. But it does cause suffering—particularly in my own experience, the not liking.

I was noticing this just yesterday. I was taking a walk and I noticed that I was walking and I didn't like to be walking. I was doing this for my exercise, so the walking was happening and not liking was happening. I've seen this before quite a bit, so it stuck out to me, and I began recognizing: okay, not liking is happening.

Before I began noticing that distinction—before I started recognizing, "Yes, walking's happening and not liking is happening"—I would be walking along in my neighborhood and notice a little subtle movement of mind when I realized I wasn't liking the walking. The next thing the mind did was, "Oh, but it's so nice out here. There are lovely trees. You can look at the sky. You can like walking." My mind tried to convince me to like the walking. What was actually going on was not liking, but the mind was trying to convince me I should like the walking.

I recognized that, and have seen in the past, that this is a trap. In some ways we think—and in mindfulness practice in particular we think—that in order to be doing something, we have to want to do it. We have to like doing it. So if we notice we're not liking something, like practicing for example, we might think we have to convert that not liking: "No, I really do like to practice."

What I've seen is that it's really, really helpful to just notice: not wanting to practice is happening. Not liking practice is happening right now. That's what's happening. It's really helpful to recognize that as a mind state.

What I noticed as I recognized, "Oh yeah, walking is happening and not liking is happening," was that when I stopped trying to convince myself that I should like to walk—when I stopped doing that and just watched the walking and the not liking—the not liking would fall away for a few moments. Then there'd just be walking, and there'd be such an ease as the not liking dissipated and fell apart. And then it would come back, and it would be, "Okay, not liking is happening," and then it would fall apart again. I was just watching this process of walking happening and liking or not liking appearing and disappearing. Knowing it when it was there and knowing it when it wasn't there. Just as the sutta described, recognizing the presence and the absence of that not liking. Very simple.

Another mental process at work, which I have tangentially referred to, is this process of feeling, feeling tone. I'll actually say a bit more about this tomorrow morning in the instructions. Feeling—the feeling tone, the aggregate of feeling—isn't about the emotional realm. It's about this much more basic realm of whether experience is recognized as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

This feeling tone, when related to bodily experience, can often be very conflated with the bodily experience itself. It's so close. If we're experiencing a stabbing or a burning or a tearing or a searing sensation, the unpleasantness of that is going to be right there. It's hard to understand that unpleasantness as a mental experience, as a mental phenomenon. Yet it is understood in the Buddha's teaching that pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral are mental phenomena, whether they relate to the pleasant or unpleasant sensations of our bodily experience or of our mental experience. All experience, whether mental or physical, has an aspect that relates to this feeling tone. All experience has a quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant—one of those.

And so it's easy to understand how something like happiness carries a pleasant feeling tone. It's easy to understand how a mental experience would have a mental feeling tone, but a little harder to understand

how a physical feeling would have a mental feeling tone. I'll just point you back to what Bhante talked about this morning regarding phantom pain in the body. From what I understand, neurobiologists point to this place of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral as being located in the brainstem. That's where it's constructed. If you do something to that area of the brainstem, the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral goes away. That's my understanding from what I've heard about it.

Another way we become confused about feeling tone is that we often think the feeling tone—whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—is somehow inherent in the experience itself. But feeling tone is actually highly conditioned, based on the mental climate of our mind, on what expectations are present, on our culture, conditions in the world, and choices we've made in the past.

Here's a basic example. For me, comfort food would probably be mashed potatoes, something like that. As a child, it just seemed like the pleasantness of mashed potatoes was inherent in the mashed potatoes themselves. Then I got to go to the South Pacific. I was in the Peace Corps for two years on an island called Vanuatu. The comfort food there is something called lap-lap. It's created by mashing up an island yam, which is nothing like the yams we have here. It's very starchy, and when you grate it, it just oozes—this really gelatinous, oozy substance. They mash it all up, pat some fish into it, lay it out on banana leaves, and let it cook for hours. It turns into this very dense, chewy substance, which to me was very unpleasant. It was hard for me to eat this. But it was their comfort food. That's what they grew up with, just as I grew up with mashed potatoes. I could see their mouths watering as the lap-lap came out of the ground. And I'm thinking, "Okay, I have to eat this," because they so wanted me to enjoy it. This is pleasant and unpleasant depending on conditions and culture. Expectations in the mind condition pleasant and unpleasant. State of mind can condition pleasant and unpleasant too.

Here's another experience I had. One evening, quite a while ago, probably early in my practice, I had developed a habit of getting up to meditate when I had insomnia instead of lying in bed trying to fall asleep. So I got up to meditate one night, and while I was meditating, I started hearing this sound—this quiet little tapping that seemed to be coming from the wall. It would start, tap for a little while, then stop and be quiet. Then it would tap again.

My initial experience was that the tapping was unpleasant. I recognized that, and I was using the noting practice. I noticed the sound and recognized: unpleasant. It wasn't hugely unpleasant. I kept observing, kept watching, and at some point I noticed that when the tapping started, there was a contraction in the body. That contracted feeling was also unpleasant. Okay, so there's sound—unpleasant. There's contraction—unpleasant. I was just observing that. Then at some point in all of this observation, I noticed that just as the tapping started, there was a flash of fear. That was really unpleasant, definitely unpleasant. It wasn't major fear, but the body got flooded with this sense of "something's in the wall, it's going to get me." Maybe a rat—I don't know what my mind created there, but it created the idea of something dangerous and scary on the other side of that wall making that tapping sound.

As soon as that fear was seen, the next time I heard the tapping, the sound itself was pretty neutral. The sound had been colored—the experience of the sound as unpleasant had been because the mind was seeing it through this fear. A lot of our pleasant and unpleasant experience comes out of the climate of our mind.

This is really helpful to notice, how these two aggregates interweave. The emotion of fear—a mental formation—laying like a filter over experience so that physical sensation, or sound in this case, was experienced as unpleasant. The feeling aggregate. Seeing how these interplayed, then recognizing clearly the fear, seeing the difference.

It's not the sound that's unpleasant. It's the fear that's unpleasant. Seeing how these interweave and are intertwined can be a very interesting exploration. Through coming back to the body, noticing what's actually happening, recognizing—okay, there's body, there's feeling, and there's emotion or reactivity.

As we understand this difference, the way these three fit together—the bodily experience, the pleasant or unpleasant quality, the liking or not liking, and the emotional response—we start to see this whole show. Watching that, seeing fear creating the conditions of experiencing something as unpleasant, that's beginning to understand disidentification. Seeing that the fear was a process that conditioned how something was felt.

We begin to recognize another way to explore this. We begin to see that our aversion to physical pain conditions how pain is felt. When the aversion falls away, when we can know, "Oh, this is aversion"—here's the physical side of it, here's the aversion, here's the mental side of it. The mental side is the aversion. The physical side is the sensation level—the tearing, the stabbing, the twisting, the burning. And then there's the unpleasantness, which is another aspect. Seeing all of these as processes interweaving, we see it's just process—the cause and effect relationship between these areas.

Another aspect of the aggregates, another area to explore, is the aggregate of perception. Perception is an even more subtle mental process than either mental formations or feeling. It's a process in the mind by which we recognize what's happening. It's a very natural process. We couldn't live without it, so we're definitely not trying to stop perception from happening.

Perception is the mind's capacity to recognize experience through repeated exposure. We hear a bell over and over again. The very first time we hear something like that, it might be, "Huh, what's that?" And we really take it in. Then we hear it over and over again, and it begins to just be, "Oh, that's the bell." We begin to experience sounds, smells, tastes, touches—all of our experience—this way. "That's the bell." The actual sound is pitch and tone and frequency. And then in our minds, the idea or the concept of "bell" happens.

It's a really useful process. It's how we can navigate the world easily without exhausting ourselves every day. You know why babies need to sleep so much? They're creating their concepts. I think that's part of

why it's exhausting to meet things new, to do this pattern matching and recognize, "This is what this is, this is what this is, this is what this is." Perception is kind of a shortcut in a sense.

So it's not a process we're going to stop, and yet it's a very helpful process to recognize and be clearly aware of as a process in the mind, because it's a doorway through which confusion enters. When we don't clearly understand that we're perceiving something and seeing our experience through that perception, confusion arises.

Just think for a moment of looking out in a room and seeing people. Your ideas about people have been formed through your whole life. The idea of "people" in your mind comes with a lot of stuff. Some of that stuff may be related to how your parents treated you, or how your teachers in school treated you. When we relate to experience through concept and don't recognize that we are relating to experience through concept, a whole host of conditioned stuff can come along for the ride. We often mistake the concept that we're relating to for reality. It doesn't even occur to us that we're relating through the idea of "bell."

There's a very quick movement from an experience to the concept about the experience. And from that concept, because concept is so close to thought, thoughts can come in that avenue. So we're sitting here in the hall and we hear a sound. First there's just hearing, and then pretty quickly there's a recognition of what that sound is—it's the sound of a car driving down Pleasant Street. And that idea of a car driving down Pleasant Street may appear in the mind as an image of a car driving down Pleasant Street, or it might appear as a word: "car."

And we say "car" in our mind, as a label almost. This is the process of perception at work.

You might notice this actually. Hearing is, I think, one of the easiest doorways where we can see or experience this process of perception happening, because there is often a distinction between our usual ways of thinking and the experience of hearing. The sound of the car going down the street is one thing, and then the image of a car in our mind or saying the word "car" to ourselves is another thing.

You'll notice that this process reveals another place to see the automatic nature of experience. You're probably not going to be able to stop yourself from saying "car" or from seeing that image. It's just the process of perception doing its job. We hear something and the mind recognizes it and identifies it in its own particular way. Playing with sound can be a very fun way to explore this process of perception.

So we're back listening to the car, hearing the car drive down Pleasant Street. We've noticed there's a car. We've seen—you know, we probably haven't clearly recognized the perception of "car" when we start thinking about cars driving down Pleasant Street and where they're going. That car might be going to Berry. There's a Dunkin' Donuts in Berry and they have cappuccinos. I probably shouldn't have mentioned that.

The mind goes off into thought from not seeing this perception at work. We hear, there's the perception of "car," and then we start thinking about it. Maybe we do recognize or remember that there's a place to get

cappuccinos in Berry, and then we start thinking—but we're not supposed to leave, and oh, I'm captive here, and oh, this is a prison, and I hate this prison... Reactivity is born from the sound, a perception and a thought not noticed.

This is one of the prime ways the mind wanders—through not seeing that we've perceived something. It's also a way that reactivity can come in, another avenue for reactivity. In that case, the sound of the car was not particularly unpleasant; it might just be kind of a wave. But then there was the recognition that it was a car, and the not really seeing that the mind started to think about cars and where it might go and what you might have if you could escape here. And then realizing: what you're reacting to in that experience is a construction of the mind. The thought "this is a prison, I can't get out of here, it's another three months or six weeks, oh my gosh!"—it's an idea in the mind to which we are reacting.

This process of perception, and watching perception happen when we can—it's a pretty subtle process. It's not something to try to do. In fact, one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says, "Nothing I tell you is anything to do. It's just information." Having talked about this, it may open you to seeing something new in your experience.

Many times I've had people come into interviews and say, "I can't stop labeling experience. I'm trying not to note, but I can't stop doing it." When I talk to them a little bit further, I recognize that what they're actually seeing is the process of perception at work. Their mind is noticing car, bird, movement, and it's recognizing it in this kind of word-forming way in the mind. Hearing about this can help you see that this too is just a process at work in your mind. It's not something to do, but it is something you might recognize, something you might notice.

The fifth aspect of the aggregates, the fifth aggregate, is consciousness. Consciousness is the knowing faculty of mind. Every experience that we have comes with this knowing process. A physical experience is known. A mental experience is known. It's like two sides of a coin. Every experience we have—there's the experience in the realm of the physical: vibration, pulling, pulsing, tingling—and then there's knowing of it. There's the experience of breath, the dynamic changing sensations of breath, and the knowing of it.

The knowing is a pretty subtle experience, but it can be kind of clear once we start to recognize it. Like right now—do you know that your lips are touching? There's the sensations, and there is a knowing that that's happening. It's actually a pretty simple experience. One of the instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta around breathing: "Breathing in, know that you're breathing in." It can be that simple, actually—pointing to the knowing of experience.

Sometimes the sensations can be quite delicate and quiet, and we may find ourselves straining to perceive the sensation level of experience. Yet we can settle back and recognize that there's a knowing of breathing in. Just now, breathing in, breathing out. Do you know that you're breathing in? Do you know that you're breathing out? Don't look too deep for this. This is an ongoing process in the mind. Again, like with feeling, every experience comes with this knowing. Not something to look for, but you may at times recognize that

the mind attunes to or notices that it knows something. Breathing in, knowing breathing in. Breathing out, knowing breathing out.

An exploration of these processes of body and mind can help us to disidentify, to not take these processes as I or me or mine. As we explore these experiences and see the cause and effect relationships, the interweaving of these experiences, we see there can't possibly be an "I" in there directing the show. There's not a "me." So it helps us to disidentify from what is happening.

Also helping the disidentification is seeing this simple process of reactivity—again, as a process. We see the process by which suffering is created. We see very clearly that we're clinging, we're holding on to something. Largely what we're holding on to is something created by the mind. And as the mind sees this, as the mind sees its own contribution to the reactivity, sees its own contribution to the suffering that we experience, the mind begins to figure out and understand how to let go.

Because the mind doesn't want to suffer. The mind doesn't want to suffer! It gets confused. The poor mind gets confused. It's tried for so long in certain ways to find happiness and thinks that it's got to be out there somewhere. And this exploration begins to reveal that the happiness comes from letting go.

So let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

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