# Five Aggregates (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:03:55

Tonight the topic is a teaching of the Buddha that really offers us a way to explore our experience—all of our experience. The name of this teaching is the Five Aggregates.

Many of you have probably heard a version of this teaching. But if you haven't heard this term before, the Five Aggregates, it can sound kind of technical. The word "aggregate" isn't a word that we use in English very much, and it sounds a little foreign and odd. The word that this is translating from the Pali is *khandha* . Apparently it was more of a common word, an ordinary word, an everyday word that means something like "heap" or "bundle."

This teaching on the five aggregates is a way the Buddha used to describe the various aspects of our experience. Processes is another way I like to think of the aggregates—they're processes of our experience. We could think of them as the five heaps, the five collections of experience, five different kinds of collections of experience.

The Buddha highlighted these five in particular. They are: form, basically our physical experience, the process of our physical body; feeling, the process of recognizing whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant; perception, the recognizing aspect of experience, how we recognize what's happening to us; mental formations, the volitional aspect of experience; and consciousness, the cognizing aspect of experience.

These aggregates in the teaching are understood as basically whatever's happening in our experience. Whatever experience we are having can be understood as fitting into one of these five heaps. It's a way of slicing up the pie of our experience. Whatever's happening right now, we could recognize: oh, that's an aspect of feeling, or that's an aspect of perception, or that's an aspect of form, of body.

The Buddha offered other ways of slicing up this experience, one other one in particular being the six sense spheres. We've talked about that—recognizing experience as being the five physical senses (sight, smell, sound, taste, touch) and then the sense door of the mind. Again, anything we experience can be understood as fitting into one of those six areas.

I think it's interesting that the Buddha offered these different frameworks. When I look at these two frameworks in counterpoint, the six sense spheres kind of emphasize a refinement of the physical realm. We've got the five physical senses and then the mind is one in the six sense spheres. In the exploration of the aggregates, there's one aggregate that is the body, and the other four talk about mental processes. So in a way, this teaching really begins to explore what's going on in the mind. What are the processes at work

in our minds?

The understanding of the aggregates in the suttas is understood both as process—a process of feeling, a process of perceiving, a process of knowing, a process of intending, a process of having volition, and also a process of body—but the aggregates are defined both as the processes and as the results of that process.

For instance, around feeling, which we've talked a lot about: we can understand the aggregate of feeling as being the heap of experience that's pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant. There's a set of experiences that we have, and every experience has one of those qualities to it. We can notice the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality to our experience. But the aggregate is also understood to be the process of feeling—how it comes about, the aspect of our mind responsible for feelings.

These aggregates are talked about in both ways, and I'll touch upon this to some extent. But in general I'd say that the easiest way to begin to get familiar with the aggregates is through recognizing just the simplicity of the results of the processes. So we can understand each of these heaps as both a noun and a verb. The verb is the process of how it comes to be, and the noun is the experience that results.

From that standpoint, I think "aggregate" is actually a pretty good translation, because aggregate has both the meaning of being a verb—to aggregate, to collect together—and something is an aggregate if it is something that has been collected together. The most common use of that word that I knew before I came to the Buddhist teaching was in geology: an aggregate rock is a rock made of other rocks. We can understand the aggregates as being, as Sallī said once, stuff made of other stuff.

The Buddha divided up experience in these different ways not just randomly, but because he saw particular value in understanding or seeing these particular slices of the pie. With respect to the aggregates, they're an excellent framework for us beginning to understand the actuality of our experience—what's actually happening in our experience, not our concepts or views or ideas about the experience. They help us begin to point to the processes of the mind, what's going on in the mind in particular, and to see what's happening in there.

The Buddha was really brilliant in describing how the mind functions, how it works. This teaching of the aggregates really begins to explore these functions of the mind. Also in this teaching, the Buddha emphasized—many times when the Buddha speaks of these five aggregates, he calls them the five aggregates affected by clinging. He talks a lot about how clinging happens around these aggregates: how clinging happens around form, how clinging happens around feeling, how clinging happens around perception and consciousness and intending or willing.

We tend to congeal and identify with experience, the clinging leading to "selfing." And so the Buddha often described the process of selfing—of I-making and my-making—with respect to these aggregates. As we begin to understand these processes of body and mind at work, our mind begins to understand how the creation of self happens, where we are identifying.

At one point, Bhikkhu Anālayo spoke about this identification around the aggregates. We think of the body as being *where* I am. Feelings as *how* I am. Perception as *what* I am experiencing. Volitional formations as *why* I'm doing something. And consciousness—this one's a little odd in his framing—as *whereby* I am knowing experience. All of that has the "I" in it. We tend to locate ourselves with respect to these aggregates. And so studying these aggregates, getting familiar with them as processes, can help us begin to undermine the way our mind believes in the sense of self.

Tonight I'd mostly like to talk about what these processes are, what these experiences are, how we can get to know them. They are discussed in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, and I'm going to paraphrase what the Buddha suggests there. He encourages us to take this as a study of mindfulness. It's in the Fourth Foundation, and he says that the Fourth Foundation is the contemplation of dhammas—*dhammānupassanā*.

Dhamma has a number of translations. Small-d *dhamma*, when used with a lowercase letter, basically means experience. It's a really simple word—it just means experience that's happening. Capital-D *Dhamm a* refers to the teachings of the Buddha, the truth, the understanding of the truth. In this sutta, it's small-d dhamma. And so, while it's often translated as "mind objects," I like to think of it as simply the awareness of experience.

In this Fourth Foundation, the Buddha encourages us to look at experience through different lenses of the Dharma. One teacher pointed out that this Fourth Foundation is studying dhamma—small d, studying experience—through the lens of Dhamma, capital D. There are five different lists in the Fourth Foundation, five Buddhist teachings that are explored through this foundation, with the aggregates being one of those lists.

For this particular teaching, the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta says, "How does one abide contemplating experience as experience?" I want to stop there for a moment, because this is something we've been talking about. We've discussed recognizing something that's happening in the present moment as something that's happening in the present moment—a very simple shift of perspective. It is not something our minds would normally do. We tend to impute meaning to what's happening in the present moment, believe there needs to be something done about it other than simply recognizing, "Oh, this is what's happening in the present moment." For our mindfulness practice, this is the essential perspective. We contemplate the body as body. We contemplate feelings as feelings. We contemplate experience as experience.

Then the sutta continues: How does one contemplate experience as experience in terms of the five aggregates affected by clinging? This brings in the framework of the five aggregates. Basically, how does one contemplate experience through this framework?

The instruction is really simple. One understands: such is form, such is its arising, such is its passing. Such is feeling, such is its arising, such is its passing. Such is perception, such is its arising, such is its passing. And so on for the remaining aggregates.

Pretty simple instruction—just encouraging us to get familiar with these aggregates in our experience. Tonight I'm going to explore mostly the "such" instruction.

What does it mean to begin to recognize each of these aggregates? There are different ways to approach an exploration of them. One way is to pick up each aggregate for a period of time. I did this when I was sitting with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma. It wasn't something I deliberately decided to do—it began more to happen—but I started looking at experience through the perspective of perception. I picked up that lens and became curious about how perception was working in my experience. So we can look at one aggregate for a particular length of time, examining what's happening there, taking it as an area of exploration.

Or we can simply notice what's happening in our experience and begin to recognize, "Oh, this is what's happening right now." Maybe hearing is happening. And in hearing, that's impingement on the ear door, which is form. Such is form. Or perhaps we notice pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—this is feeling. We can approach it in different ways.

Mostly I'm interested this evening in offering descriptions of what these aggregates are, to support the possibility that you might begin to see them. I'm not especially saying that for the next three days you should look at these aggregates. Sometimes Sayadaw U Tejaniya would offer a teaching like this, and I'd go off and try to do it. I'd think, "Oh, I need to go look at this," and I'd come back trying to report on it. He'd say, "Don't try to do that. Nothing I say is something for you to do. It's just information. It will support your practice to hear this information." So I offer this in that way—you don't have to try to do this. That said, I'll offer a little bit of guidance here and there to help you begin to see some of these during this talk.

Form points to our bodily experience, the bodily processes at work. What we experience in the touch sense, in the realm of our physical sense, is understood through the lens of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. This is really just a way to explore the elemental nature of our experience. What are the component parts of our physical experience? Not the concepts of our experience—we talked about this distinction this morning, between the experience and the idea of the body.

We can feel the experience of hand through knowing a vibratory, pulsing, pressure quality—hardness, moisture, coolness, heat. We can know those sensations. Yet we often also have an image or an overlay of the concept of "hand" there. We often experience our physicality through the concept rather than the direct, actual felt experience. Beginning to get familiar with what we might call the language of the body—how the body communicates with us—is really helpful for touching into the actuality of our physical experience. It helps us begin to tease apart what is actually bodily experience and what are the mental processes that get conflated with it.

In the touch sense, these four areas of earth, air, fire, and water each have their character. The earth element consists of those aspects of the body that feel solid. Right now, in your experience, can you touch into a sense of solidity? These sensations include heaviness, hardness, softness, a sense of the body's

weight sitting on earth. Perhaps a sense of the hardness of the bones. The language this element speaks to us through is hardness, solidity, weight, density.

The air element relates to sensations connected with movement. The breath, the movement of the breath right now—feeling into the expansion of the chest as the breath goes in, that movement is a manifestation of air element. The breath is directly connected to the intake of air, and then the release: the falling of the ribcage, the letting go. Physical movement is one of the most obvious manifestations of air element. When we move, when we walk, movement is understood as air element.

At a subtler level, air element communicates through sensations of vibration, pulsing, tingling. Right now, can you touch into this? Perhaps put your attention in your hand—it's often an easy place to feel these sensations: vibration, tingling, pulsing. Sometimes air element also manifests as a feeling of pulling or pushing, like the feeling of the chest as it expands. As the air goes in and there's pressure, that too is a manifestation of air element.

And then fire element is the temperature—heat and coolness all along that range. There's plenty of opportunity to feel this during the day as the temperature changes, as our bodies move indoors and outdoors. We feel that. Sometimes, if you put your hand on your cheek, that can highlight the temperature element. At least in my case, often there's quite a difference between the temperature of the hand and the cheek, and so that contrast becomes apparent. Warmth, coolness, heat.

Water element is the element that most obviously expresses in moisture. We might feel that with tears or in our mouth with saliva. There's a kind of fluidity or cohesion. Often I find the water element is most easily seen in dependence on some of the other elements. This is perhaps easy to see in the mouth.

So now we'll take a little exploration of these elements in the mouth. Take your tongue—Marcia Rose is the person I learned this from—take your tongue and push it against your teeth. See if you can notice in that the hardness of your teeth. And then shift to recognizing that a hardness is arising. We're knowing the hardness because of the pushing. We're pushing and feeling the hardness, but see if you can touch into the pushing itself. That's air element. You may or may not have a sense of temperature in your mouth.

Now take your tongue and run it across the surface of your teeth. Notice the kind of smoothness that you feel, perhaps. If your mouth is really dry, it may not feel so smooth. But the smoothness of the movement across the hardness—air and earth, the movement of the tongue across that hardness reveals a slipperiness, which is water element. And so we know these elements in dependence on each other.

I would encourage you not necessarily to try to figure out if an experience is water or air or earth, but to simply begin to get curious about this language of the body, how the body communicates with us.

In our other senses—sight, the basic elemental experience of sight is not what we typically perceive. As I sit here and look out, I see people, I see walls, I see tankas, I see candles, I see zabutans and zafus, but that's not elemental. That's the overlay of concept. The eye takes things in as form and color. The ear in

pitch, tone, frequency. The tongue in sweet, salty, sour, pungent, savory. Smell in floral, woody, fruity. Apparently—I looked this up today, wondering what are the component parts of smell—it's got more texture than most of our senses, actually. It's got many different distinct things that we can smell, indicating perhaps the importance of that for our survival.

This exploration, particularly around getting familiar with the language of the body, how the body communicates with our mind, begins to help us distinguish and recognize the difference between what's physical and what's mental. This is actually much more easy to confuse than we might think. We might think, "Yes, I know the difference between body and mind." But we often confuse them, as in the example of seeing an image of our body and knowing our experience through that image. A mental perception of experience influencing our experience.

As we begin to get familiar with these very elemental experiences, it supports our beginning to recognize the mental processes at work. The first of those is feeling. We've talked a lot about feeling—Carol did a whole talk on it. This is the feeling tone of experience, whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We've discussed the importance of this: as we begin to recognize the feeling tone of experience, we see whole processes at work that leap off of that—craving, clinging, becoming. Guy spoke of this last night, that beginning to recognize the little space that can happen when we just know feeling. The possibility of it not necessarily—when we just connect, "Oh, this is pleasant"—it can short-circuit that whole movement to craving and clinging and becoming.

Feeling tone is understood as a mental experience. That's perhaps easy for us to understand when we're looking at mind states. Happiness, for example, feels pleasant. Aversion often feels unpleasant.

We know that those are mental feelings. But the body is also a rich terrain of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. How do we understand feeling associated with bodily experience as mental? What does that mean?

Actually, I was rather surprised to learn at one point that neuroscience agrees with this—that the understanding of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral is formed in a very basic part of the brain, in the brainstem. If there's damage in that area, we can't feel pleasant or unpleasant anymore. So this feeling of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral is indeed created in the mind.

As an example of how to understand this as something mental, let me take you through a little thought experiment. Imagine yourself standing on a busy corner waiting for a friend. There are many people going by, and you're waiting there. Right at the appointed time, you feel a gentle touch on your shoulder. Because you're waiting for your friend, that touch may be experienced as pleasant. You turn and it's your friend—exactly what you were expecting. Your friend came up and touched you gently. So that experience may be felt as pleasant in that situation.

Now imagine yourself on the same kind of busy street corner, standing there waiting to cross the street.

You're not waiting for a friend. Someone touches you in the same gentle way. That may be experienced as a startle. You may actually experience it as unpleasant, because you're not expecting it.

So one of the things to begin to be curious about with feeling is the fact that it's conditioned. Feeling in any moment is not inherent in the experience itself. It is highly conditioned based on our mind state, our expectations, our agendas, our views, our conditioning, and the conditions in the world.

On one long retreat, I had an example of this—simple but very powerful for having my understanding dive deeply into how feeling is conditioned. It undermined the idea that feeling is somehow "out there," that somebody can make me feel a certain way. It really illuminated how feeling is conditioned.

It happened over tea at IMS, the evening meal. It was a very simple meal that evening. I had an apple and some bean dip. I took a bite of the apple—this was fall in New England—and it burst in my mouth with tartness and sweetness. It was so pleasant, one of the most pleasant apple experiences I've ever had. Very delightful. The whole body was bubbling with delight.

Then I tasted the bean dip, which had a very different taste. It was not unpleasant, but it didn't have the same delightful quality. But then I took another bite of the apple after the bean dip, and it was even more pleasant. Something about the conditions of having put the savoriness of the bean dip on my tongue—maybe the oil in it—highlighted the tartness and sweetness of the apple. There was even more delight, more ripples of pleasure.

I began playing with this, noticing the pleasant aspect and the variations of feeling tone. I noticed that if I took multiple bites of apple, one after another, the pleasure diminished. Have a bite of bean dip, then another bite of apple—the pleasure was stronger. After some time of all this, it just got more normalized. It ceased being quite so phenomenal. Maybe a little bit of pleasant. Same apple, different conditions, different feeling tone.

That simple exploration led me to see—and this is another encouragement for continuity—that we can see in the most unexpected places how processes work. So this is some of the process of feeling: seeing its conditioned nature. How does feeling arise? This is part of the satipaṭṭhāna—seeing that feeling arises in dependence on conditions. Stronger pleasant after the bean dip.

Less pleasant after the tongue had experienced the flavor multiple times.

Also with feeling, we can begin to recognize—kind of in juxtaposition to body sensation—the difference between raw sensation and our felt relationship to it. Heat, coolness. You're standing out in the cold and you come inside, and perhaps the heat in the room feels pleasant. At another time, this particular temperature might feel unpleasant, depending on what the conditions are. So the heat, the coolness, are one thing. Our relationship to it through feeling is another.

All of our experience in the physical realm is like this, and we can begin to tease this apart. We can

actually begin to recognize, in unpleasant physical sensation for instance, something quite interesting. At one point I was feeling a very powerful sensation of my ankle against the mat—strong pressure against the mat. What I might call pain, but it just felt like strong neutral experience.

A lot of what we call pain, and in turn unpleasant, is because we have the *idea* that it's painful. Check it out for yourself. The idea of pain, not necessarily the actual sensation of pressure or hardness—that actually might be neutral. But the idea of, "I've been sitting here a long time, that pressure feels strong, that's going to hurt, I'm going to have a bruise on my foot"—all of that is contributing to the experience of it being unpleasant.

So exploring this kind of dynamic between these aggregates is also a very interesting exploration.

Perception is the third of these aggregates. This is the process whereby we recognize what's happening. We talked about it a little bit—that it's a natural process. We couldn't function without it. We use it to navigate the world, recognizing that I look out here and see people and zabutans and hard floor and walls and doors. Really useful for me to know the difference between a wall and a door. This is perception at work.

It's a relationship that develops over time. We experience walls and doors when we're very young. We begin to understand that walls create a barrier—wouldn't want to run headlong into a wall. A door, on the other hand, you know that it gives. You can push through it.

This perceptual process happens because we come into contact with experience over and over again. Perception is related to memory. We've seen things over and over again. Now I've seen many zabutans in my twenty years as a meditator. I know what it is now. I didn't at first.

So the perceptual process, the recognition of experience, is how we know what something is based on our memory. It's almost like a memory lookup. We experience something—a sound—and our mind kind of searches for the nearest match in our memory banks and says, "Oh, it's that."

The other day in the hall, somebody mentioned this: the hearing of a sound and the mind attributing it to a fan. "Why is there such a loud fan in here?" And then recognizing, "Oh, it's not a fan, it's the stream outside." This is perception at work—we recognize what's happening, we do this memory matching. Really useful process for our survival, and yet really prone to error. It's not perfect by any means, as the example of the fan and the stream shows.

A kind of classic example of perception and misperception is the snake and rope misperception. You walk into a dim room and there's a coiled rope in the corner. You might misperceive it as a snake. This is a function of perhaps the dim light—coiled forms might be snakes—but the mind perceives it potentially as snake. A whole host of responses can arise based on that. Fear, for instance. Emotional reaction to, "Oh, there's a snake in the corner."

I walked up to a crack in the sidewalk at Spirit Rock some years ago, and it turned into a rattlesnake. When I walked up to it, there was no fear. As soon as it coiled, there was fear.

So perception influences our responses to the world. And misperception happens all the time.

We have to recognize that perception is useful and a natural function of our minds that helps us navigate the world. But what we tend to do is reify our perceptions. We take our perceptions to be the truth. This is in the realm of what Bonnie was talking about—the vipalas, the misperceptions of reality.

It's like somebody who walks into a room and sees a coiled rope in the corner and perceives it as a snake. Usually that kind of misperception can be easily corrected by turning the lights on and seeing that it's actually a rope. But our minds get hardened around our perceptions. Perhaps we've gone in there and seen that coiled form and believe it's a snake. We walk out of the room without ever confirming what it actually is, and we reify: "There's snakes in that room." We go tell everybody else there's snakes in that room. The belief gets hardened. We have everybody else being afraid to go into the room. This is a silly example, but this kind of thing creates a lot of suffering in our world—perceiving something in some way, reifying it, believing it.

As we start to see this process, one of the easiest ways, at least in my own practice, to really explore perception is in the realm of hearing. It's the first place where I could clearly see the difference between the experience of hearing and the perception. This happens all the time. We're sitting in the hall and some sound happens. We hear something and our mind recognizes and identifies it. Our mind says "bird," or perhaps we see an image of a bird sitting in a tree. If you're a bird watcher, you might even identify the kind of bird based on the sound. That's perception at work. Based on the hearing, we know that sounds we've heard like that have come from birds, and so we perceive it as a bird. Now, it may be that somebody's got one of those little bird things making that sound. We may be misperceiving again. But we believe it to be what we perceive it to be.

As we begin to see this process, we recognize perception at work. We can have some measure of recognition that this is happening. "Bird. Think it's a bird." But recognizing that perception is so prone to error, we can begin to undermine the reification of believing our perceptions to be what's actually happening. What we're perceiving, in my understanding, is a reflection of what's out there. It is related to what's out there. But what we perceive is entirely constructed by our minds. All we can know is what has been constructed by our minds. We're not trying to stop perception from happening—we couldn't function without it. But we can recognize it as a function rather than reality. If we could all understand that we are perceiving the world in different ways, I think there would be a lot more peace in this world.

Then there are mental formations. Mental formations encompass the many mental activities involving volition, choice, attention, and intention. These include all of our emotions—anger, fear, confusion, pride, desire, irritation, rage—the entire emotional realm is within mental formations. All of the wholesome states of mind that we've been discussing—peace, mindfulness, concentration, tranquility—these are also

mental formations. And thoughts are mental formations too. It's a huge category, encompassing most of what we observe in our minds. Intention, which we talked about seeing—that's a mental formation. Noticing attention—that's a mental formation. Recognizing beliefs, agendas, views—all of these are mental formations.

Those are mental formations. So it's a vast category, and we spend a lot of time exploring this in our mindfulness practice. We've talked a great deal about how to meet all of these through the instructions offered during the first few weeks of the retreat.

The Pali term for mental formation is *sankhara*, and it carries a dual meaning. It refers both to that which has been put together—the actual experience of anger or fear or confusion or joy or peace or mindfulness or intention—and to the process of putting together itself. When we see these experiences, we're seeing the result of what has been assembled. But *sankhara* also means "to put together," pointing to the active, dynamic nature of these formations.

This second meaning is particularly interesting. There's a teaching in the suttas that illuminates this verb-like, process-oriented aspect of mental formations. I'll paraphrase it here: Volitional formations condition the conditioned. What do they condition? They condition form as conditioned form. They condition feeling as conditioned feeling. They condition perception as conditioned perception. They condition mental formations as conditioned formations. They condition consciousness as conditioned consciousness.

Essentially, mental formation is the engine that conditions all of the aggregates. When we experience the volitional formation of anger, for instance, it conditions our body—we feel pressure and heat, our face may become distorted with contortions. Anger conditioning form. It conditions feeling—when we are angry, we tend to experience things as unpleasant. It conditions perception—when we're angry, we tend to see how someone has wronged us, shaping how we take in information. It conditions more anger—when we're angry, it breeds further anger in our minds. And it conditions consciousness—our awareness becomes filtered through anger, taking in certain things while missing others because of this frame we're looking through.

Understanding the conditioning nature of our mental formations is tremendously important. There's a powerful force here, especially in beliefs and views, to shape our experience—often in ways we don't see. So much suffering comes from unseen beliefs conditioning how we respond to the world. All the "isms"—racism, sexism, ageism—and the phobias around differences in gender and sexuality are rooted in belief.

Consider the pervasive view in American culture that this country is the land of opportunity, that anyone who tries hard enough can fulfill their dreams. That belief can lead to a kind of blindness, an inability to see how certain aspects of our society grant some groups access to privileges that make this belief more attainable for them than for others. So much suffering emerges from this conditioning power of the *sankh*

*aras*.

Yet we can also use this power skillfully. What we're doing here in practice is bringing in new conditions—mindfulness and wisdom—reconditioning our minds through this very capacity of mental formations to shape experience. So it's not wholly problematic, but we need to understand how it works so that our minds can head in a different direction.

Then the last of the five aggregates: consciousness, or knowing.

We've talked about this actually quite a bit. I think I spoke about it some last night, and this morning the guided meditation was pointing to this—the field of knowing, the process of knowing. Every experience comes with the experience and the knowing of it. And it's possible in our mindfulness to see either side of that experience.

Often we orient towards the object. We orient towards the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste, the touch, the emotion, the thought, the feeling. And yet with every one of those comes a knowing. We can begin to be curious about that. Some of the guided meditation this morning offered one way to step back into that field of knowing. We can begin to distinguish when the attention steps back into that field of knowing and when it's touching into the object. The mind has the capacity to do either one.

That question came up this morning too. In my own experience, it's often useful to just watch which the mind is doing. Neither one is right or wrong. The mind has the capacity to do both. Sometimes one may be more helpful for us than another. But if we try to say, "Oh, I want to rest in the field of knowing," and we try to find that experience, I've given myself headaches trying to do that when it wasn't just naturally there. We really need to honor where our minds are exploring in this moment. So it's not so much something to do. We can begin to recognize when we're aware of the knowing, when we're aware of the object.

There are a few ways we can explore this, and some of these tools have come up. We talked about using phrases like "seeing is known." We can notice seeing is happening, which orients us more towards the object of seeing. If we explore "seeing is known," it may begin to point us back to the knowing a little bit more. And again, distinguishing between physical seeing and mental knowing. Seeing is known. Hearing is known.

We can also recognize the knowing of mental experience. This was a little more challenging for me. But I found a way into this recognition—it was easiest when I was experiencing something unpleasant. Aversion. I was experiencing aversion, and at one point, while I was experiencing this intense aversion attack, my mind shifted to, "Oh, and aversion is known right now." When the mind made that shift to "aversion is known," it was clear to me that the mind was seeing it in a different way. Because when the mind was knowing aversion, the experience was unpleasant. When the mind was knowing that it knew aversion, the experience was neutral. Because the attention was in the knowing, which is neutral.

Knowing has a very neutral feeling, which is partly why it's harder to see. Neutral is a harder experience to touch into.

An exploration of these aggregates begins to clarify the difference between body and mind. It helps us see how mind conditions body, how body conditions mind, how mind conditions mind. As we start to tease these processes apart, we begin to see how they interact. They are constantly going on. These aggregates are—we're not doing them. They are taking care of themselves. Whether we're asleep or awake, whether we're mindful or not, these aggregates are doing their thing. Perception is perceiving. Knowing is knowing. Feeling is feeling. Our volitional formations are forming. And they're interacting. We have volitional formations that influence our feelings and our body. Our body, when we have certain experiences in the body, it influences our reactions, our responses in the mind. So they're all interweaving.

And we can begin to see this conditioned process at work, unfolding on its own. Not me in charge of it. Thank goodness we don't have to be in charge of it.

It helps us to see this, to see this conditioned nature. It begins to undermine our belief that I'm doing it. It helps us to see there isn't somebody here actually controlling. Nobody's in charge.

Through this seeing, wisdom grows. The understanding of how our minds work grows. And that wisdom begins to release this clinging. It begins to release the delusions that form around these aggregates, the confusions.

And that wisdom is what allows us to be free.

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