Mental Formations: Constructing Our Lives

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 48:38

Seeing into our experience. And just this very simple practice. I think the other day I mentioned Sayadaw's pointing that the meditating mind is simple, not complicated. And if it feels like the meditating mind is complicated, then that's just an object. And yet this very simple mind reveals an amazing, mind-blowing mind. The complexity of what that simple mind can see is quite astounding.

Quite literally, our minds construct our lives. Everything that we experience, everything that we can experience, is a creation of our minds. I have the view or the belief that that creation of mind is related to something that's actually out there. So I do think that you're all sitting out there, and that I'm not just giving this Dharma talk to a brain in a vat somewhere. I do think that there is something that the mind is working with, is processing, but what we experience—our experience—is constructed. And because it's constructed, there's a lot of room for mistake, a lot of room for confusion.

So tonight, this is the topic: this constructing nature of our minds. I'd like to explore it through the teaching on the five aggregates, a teaching the Buddha pointed to in terms of describing our experience. This phenomenological world of our experience can be understood through these processes of body and mind. The five aggregates can be understood as five processes of body and mind: body, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

The word aggregate is kind of a funny word. It's not a word in English that we use very much. And that contrasts apparently to the Pali word *khandha*, which is a more ordinary word that means something like group or bundle or heap—heap of stuff. But in reflecting on the word aggregate, actually it's an interesting word to use for this particular teaching from the Buddha, because this teaching around the five aggregates is both a teaching around the processes of body and mind and the results of those processes.

There's a way in which body, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness can be understood as the processes by which our world is put together, but also understood in each case as being the things that are experienced. So in the case of body, for example, the body is this physical form, the four elements. And yet it's also understood as being not only the experience of pressure, heat, coolness, tension, tightness, but the process that does that.

The word aggregate can be used in both noun and verb forms, much as with the *khandhas*. For instance, the feeling process is defined as feeling because it feels. So it's defined as a process, but it's also defined as the thing that feeling feels: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It's both a verb and a noun. It's both the process by which we experience and the things experienced.

The word aggregate also has that quality. It can be used as a verb—to aggregate—which means to pull together, to draw together, to collect, to group. And it can be used as a noun. The main way I've heard it used as a noun is aggregate rock—a rock that is basically made of other rocks. This is a great description of what these *khandhas* are. Sally Armstrong sometimes says maybe we could just translate *khandhas* as "stuff made of other stuff." Let's take the technical out of it.

Briefly, I want to overview the five aggregates, but where I really want to explore this evening is the constructing, the aggregate of construction: mental formations.

The first aggregate is body—this process of the four elements: earth, air, fire, water. The sensations that are felt: coolness, heat, lightness, heaviness, pressure, tension, tightness, vibration, pulsing, tingling—this whole range of physical sensations, plus also sight, sound, smell, taste. This is the realm of the body.

One thing that is particularly useful about this list of our human experience, this set of processes that make up our human experience, is that in this case one of the aggregates is physical and the other four are mental. It really lends itself well to this exploration of the mind because it teases apart the processes of mind.

Feeling, the process of feeling—feeling what? Feeling pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is a very simple mental process responsible for feeling and the simple feeling itself. We've talked about this in the groups and in some of the talks. You're all very familiar with this aspect of experience.

Then perception—the mental process responsible for recognizing experience, categorizing experience, naming experience. The recognition of concepts comes through this: recognizing what's out in the world as objects. This happens through the field of perception. So I look out into this room and see walls and windows and zabutans and people.

And it's a process of perception, of recognizing—it's connected to memory, this perceptual process. It's connected to having been exposed to zabutans and walls and windows and people, and the mind recognizes them. It's almost like a very simple pattern-matching mechanism in some ways, this part of perception. We hear a sound and recognize a mourning dove. That pattern matching—I talked in another talk about hearing a sound and identifying it, perceiving it as a pig, and then later discovering that it was a bat. This is the process of perception at work: a recognition based on prior experience, based on memory of what something is.

So perception includes this kind of naming of experience, but it also includes our recognition of space and time. That's also part of perception—that we have a sense of distance and location and time. It's perception at work creating that understanding.

At one point in Hawaii I was meditating, and there are lots of birds there, but the birds in Hawaii are kind of like—birds rule in Hawaii. It's amazing how many birds there are, and some of them are very loud. I

was meditating in my room and it felt like this 360-degree bird zoo that I was in. I could sometimes experience this sense of the mind almost going out and locating the birds in space based on the sound. It was like a sense of floating in this space created by the mind through the perception of sound and through that perception, the location. This is perception at work.

And then volitional formations—the one I really want to hone in on tonight—but just briefly for now, it's more the volitional aspect of experience. The many kinds of volitional activities in the mind: emotions, thoughts, beliefs, agendas. This is a huge category of stuff.

And then the last mental aggregate is consciousness. This simple function of knowing. Every experience is known. Whether we are mindful or not, this knowing process is going on, knowing meeting experience. Sayadaw sometimes asks or says something like, "If you meet somebody that you've met in the past, maybe you weren't terribly mindful while you were meeting that person. But when you meet them again, you recognize them." And he says, "Why? Because perception and feeling and consciousness were doing their job." Whether we're mindful or not, we are perceiving, we are feeling, we are knowing. And mental formations kind of tumble along.

So these five aggregates function—they are the tumbling on of our experience. Every moment the five aggregates appearing in some variation.

The Buddha talked about this particular teaching a lot in relationship to the exploration of not-self. Carol talked about not-self last week, about exploring the self. Studying the self, we forget the self. Forgetting the self, we become awakened by the ten thousand things. And so in a way the five aggregates are a way that we can study this.

The Buddha described that clinging to these aggregates was responsible for the creation of the sense of self. And so the exploration around these five aggregates begins to be a kind of pointing to the not-self nature of experience. We begin to recognize, as we open to noticing what's arising in experience, that these five aggregates are just arising. That—thank goodness—a self doesn't have to figure out how to do these five aggregates, because the complexity there is amazing. What the mind can know, understand, meet, how it functions. And yet we cling to these aggregates and then attribute a sense of self to the experience.

We can cling to any of these five aggregates. There's a teaching where the Buddha enumerates twenty ways that identity views come to be—basically four different ways of clinging or identifying a sense of self around each of these five aggregates. He really sorted it apart. And I'm not going to go there—I'm not going to go through the twenty kinds of identity view. But what I have seen in my own experience is that this exploration of the aggregate of mental formations is a huge terrain of selfing. And the belief in the constructions that it makes as being I, me, mine—very sticky.

And so starting to explore the constructing nature of this volitional formation aggregate can begin. And

this happens just through witnessing, being curious about volitional formations, which is what we're doing already, actually. We're already doing a lot of this, because volitional formations basically encompasses so many mental activities that we're already looking at.

Emotions, thoughts, states of mind, tranquility, mindfulness, anger, frustration, irritation, bliss, joy, peace, ease, calm, concentration—these are all mental formations. They have some aspect of intentionality in them, an aspect of the mind doing something, an intentional quality.

Other forms of mental formations include intention itself—this moment before we act, before an action of body, speech, or mind, there's this impulse that can be known as a mental phenomenon before the action happens. This too is a mental formation. Beliefs, agendas, views—these are also mental formations. It's a huge range of experience, which we have been opening to.

Yesterday morning I spoke about looking at the conditioned nature of our minds. Part of this exploration involves getting to know the job description of our experience, of our mind states—Carol also spoke about this—and exploring the states themselves.

The other piece around volitional formations is that there are two sides to this: they are constructed, and they construct.

They are constructed, and we see that they are constructed. We start to understand that our mind states are constructed by seeing them come to be. We witness, at times, a thought arise in the mind. Somebody described something like this in one of the groups—seeing a thought and then seeing how there's a tendency to believe that thought and then create a whole state of doubt or confusion or anger based on just the arising of the thought and the belief in it. We see how it's constructed, how the anger or the confusion arises based on this construction around a thought that has arisen. So we can start to see the constructed nature of our mental formations.

Some of you have also talked about the way those mental formations then construct, the way they influence our experience. Many of you have described seeing a kind of filter, or the arising of some reactive state of mind—anger, for instance, or frustration—and then seeing how that affects subsequent experience. The state itself is constructed, and then it tends to construct our experience.

This aspect of mental formations is really the engine of what our minds meet. It's the engine of the creation of our lives, this phenomenological world created through this engine of volitional formations.

Volitional formations are described as being these states of mind—frustration, anger, annoyance, love, joy, peace, ease, mindfulness—this whole range of beliefs, views, attitudes. But volitional formations are also described in one place as the verb, as the constructor.

I'll read this in Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation. It does a relatively good job of capturing the play of words that happen in the Pali around the word that is translated as mental formation or volitional

formation—*saṅkhāra*. In the Pali, there's a noun and a verb, and they're all based on this word *saṅkhāra*. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates *saṅkhāra* as "fabrication." I kind of like what that evokes because it really captures this sense of the mind creating, constructing, fabricating—fabricating what we experience.

There's a point in the sutta where the Buddha goes through each of the five aggregates and asks, "So why do they call it feeling?" And he says, "Well, it feels. That's why we call it feeling. It feels pleasant. It feels unpleasant. It feels neutral." And perception: "Why is it called perception? Because it perceives." And he goes on to describe what it perceives.

For fabrications, he says: "Why are they called fabrications? They fabricate fabricated things. So they're called fabrications. What do they fabricate? They fabricate fabricated form as form. They fabricate fabricated feeling as feeling. They fabricate fabricated perception as perception. They fabricate fabricated fabrications as fabrications. They fabricate fabricated consciousness as consciousness."

This is why they're called fabrications.

In this particular passage from the suttas, you've probably noticed that basically the Buddha is pointing to this fabricating part of our mind—and showing how it fabricates all of experience. He points to it fabricating the other four aggregates. This is a pretty amazing pointing, offered in a very matter-of-fact way: these mental fabrications tumble along, creating form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness.

What these fabrications are has a huge effect on what is fabricated. If the fabrication is anger, what is it fabricating? It's fabricating a body through that fabrication. The experience in the body when anger is arising can be one of pressure and heat. The face itself can even become distorted. I touched on this yesterday—the mind state of anger affects the physical body. It fabricates experience in the physical body. This is my understanding of a way to approach this teaching. It may not be the only way, but it has been useful for me to explore it in this manner.

Anger constructs sensations in the body, fabricates sensations in the body. It fabricates feeling. When there's anger arising, there tends to be unpleasant feeling. Although to my surprise, on one retreat I was really getting to know anger quite well. There was an event that had happened during the retreat, and whenever the mind thought of that event, there would be the arising of anger. So I got to watch this process over and over again. One time, in watching, the mind saw the very beginnings of the growth of anger—the thought, and then this infusion of a sense of aliveness, a warmth and a kind of fullness that was really pleasant for about a split second before it turned to heat and pressure.

It was very interesting to see this, the constructing power of the mind. To me it was a revelation, because in that seeing of the fabrication—that initial, quick fabrication of pleasant in the anger—that understanding arose: there's the hook. That's why the mind likes this. That's why it goes there, that feeling. And very quickly it gets out of control. But there's a little hook there. So the fabrication of feeling.

The fabrication of perception. When we're angry, we tend to see things through a lens of anger. We perceive things—we may tend to perceive actions that other people are doing through that lens, believing that somebody is hostile to us because we have this perspective of anger. So perception is affected by this mental formation. This is true of all our mental formations. I'm walking through anger here just to give a flavor for what happens.

Anger tends to construct more anger. It's kind of its nature. The Buddha, in one of his very succinct teachings, said: whatever one frequently ponders becomes the inclination of the mind. If we're frequently engaging in anger, anger is what is reinforced. Anger is what is cultivated. Anger is strengthened. The mental formation of anger tends to create more anger—when we're not mindful of it. When we add mindfulness into the mix, something else can happen.

And consciousness is also affected by anger. I gave the example the other day of how consciousness can be affected by an agenda. Last week, in talking about delusion, I described how an agenda can actually have us be conscious of some things and not other things—that consciousness simply doesn't receive certain things when we have certain filters. We tend to take in experience that we are oriented towards. Consciousness of some things will arise and other things won't, given this filter, given this construct, given this fabrication.

And so, seeing this fabricated nature—

This is useful because we start to see that it's not personal. And we tend to take it so personally. We tend to identify with our volitional formations—it's a very strong place of identification. "I am this angry person. I am this miserable person." And when I'm not miserable, I know that really what I am is miserable. We create this identification and drag along the idea of an identity around a mental formation, constructing an idea of permanent miserableness.

But what we can see, if we start to get curious about our mental formations, is their impermanent nature. They come and they go. They're constructed based on conditions. We see that they're constructed based on conditions. And often we can start to see—it's almost like with the mindfulness taking in this constructing of experience—the mind begins to recognize something along the lines of, "Who did that? I didn't make that happen, it just happened." So we begin to understand the not-self nature of these constructions.

The mind constructs dukkha. It's quite amazing to see this. The Buddha spoke about this construction of dukkha in a teaching on dependent origination, which I'm not going to try to describe right now, but just to point to. In that teaching, he pointed to some key volitional formations that drive the creation of suffering: ignorance, craving, and clinging. When ignorance, craving, and clinging are in the mind, it leads to suffering. And again, these are conditioned, they're constructed based on what we've learned, our conditioning from our lives.

We talked about this some last week too—the way we are conditioned by our cultures, by our families.

Many of our volitional formations are not just personal. Our volitional formations are absorbed through our cultural and familial experiences. This is very much a way our minds are influenced by the collective. Views, opinions, beliefs, ideas—most of those making up our fabrication are not arising just from our own experience. They're coming in from our training. We've accumulated views, beliefs, ideas, and agendas from our cultures. And many of the views that come in through our culture are reinforcing ignorance and craving and clinging.

I can't particularly remember the details of this ad, but there are many ads that send this message: craving is good, craving will make you happy. There was an ad of a man sitting on a Ford truck, surrounded by mounds of camping gear. He's sitting in a meditation posture, and the tagline says something like, "In order to be one with everything, you gotta have one of everything." And this is why this person likes their Ford Explorer. These are the messages we get from our culture. Craving and ignorance and clinging are reinforced. It's not personal.

When we can see it as impersonal, it gets much easier—much, much easier—to be curious about it and to watch it, witness it unfold. And again, when we bring mindfulness into the equation, when mindfulness is meeting experience, this is a wholesome mental construction, a wholesome mental formation. This is the way the mind can transcend and shift so that it's no longer in that cycle of creating dukkha out of ignorance and craving and clinging, cycling over and over again, creating suffering. With the insertion of mindfulness and wisdom, a whole different path can unfold.

We cultivate wholesome qualities—the seven factors of awakening: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture or interest, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. These are mental formations, and they construct more wholesome experience. So the five aggregates are the unfolding of our human experience, both the habitual and the reactive, and also the skillful and responsive. Love, compassion, wisdom, patience, generosity—these are mental formations that lead to the end of suffering. They create the conditions for the mind to understand, for wisdom to develop, and for wisdom to release the suffering.

There's another description of conditioned experience called transcendent dependent origination, which describes how when faith and wisdom come to bear on our experience, a whole different chain of experience unfolds—delight, joy, concentration, happiness, seeing things as they are. It's this different direction of the mind.

And so here, on this retreat, we are mostly exploring a very receptive kind of practice, not trying particularly to stop the reactive kilesa constructions, and also not trying particularly to construct the wholesome formations. So how does it work? What are we doing here?

This practice supports both the releasing of the unwholesome and the cultivation of the wholesome in some very natural ways. The perspective that we're bringing to our practice—wise view, this perspective of being curious about experience as human experience, being curious about what is suffering and what is lessening of suffering, what is creating the mind to be tense versus open, relaxed, receptive—with that

perspective of mindfulness, we're bringing both mindfulness and wisdom together in how we are observing. And right there, we are encouraging those wholesome mental formations. Just the way in which we are paying attention to experience is encouraging wholesome mindfulness and wisdom. It's very simple, the way that grows.

As we explore any reactive states with mindfulness—a reactive state like frustration, for instance, or irritation—as we explore that with mindfulness and wisdom, something happens. Instead of that construction continuing, it seems to put the constructing power of that formation into neutral when we bring mindfulness and wisdom to it. When there's strong mindfulness and wisdom, that reactive state is no longer digging its rut. It's no longer reinforcing the conditioning of that state. Something about the mindfulness and wisdom is stronger.

Some of you have mentioned the continuous mindfulness feeling like a great protection. It is a great protection. It protects you from unwholesome states. It's a refuge. As we open with mindfulness and wisdom to noticing those reactive states, it creates the conditions for those states not to strengthen. And actually sometimes we see them actually vanish. And in that vanishing, aversion may turn to non-aversion.

So this is weakening the reactive states and simultaneously strengthening the capacity, the qualities of mind—patience, kindness, that allowing attention we're exploring, mindfulness, wisdom, concentration as the stability of mindfulness is encouraged, tranquility of mind, not being so reactive. The practice that we're doing very naturally releases those unwholesome, unskillful states and increases the wholesome and skillful ones.

We also start to get curious, and some of you have talked about states in which there's not a lot of reactivity happening. What we can be aware of then is the calm, the equanimity, the joy, the delight. And in contrast to mindfulness being brought to unwholesome states, when we become mindful of delight and joy, it creates the conditions for them to strengthen, for them to arise more often.

It does take some trust to enter into this very receptive style of practice—to not be in charge of the doing of it and instead to be curious about what's being constructed right now and to witness it. While we're witnessing the constructions at play, we begin to understand something about impermanence. We begin to understand something about how this construction is just happening by itself. And so we see into these truths—not by trying to, not by saying, "I'm going to see not-self." That doesn't usually work out that well. But just through the curiosity, impermanent, unreliable, not-self are revealed. And that wisdom, that arising of wisdom, so powerfully releases and frees suffering.

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