Evening Talk: Five Aggregates and Studying Selfing

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As we practice receiving experience, there are lots of different things that we notice—different patterns, different habits of mind, some personal to us, familiar reactivities, and some more universal. All of what's happening to us, what's happening in experience, is just this human experience tumbling on. In many ways, everything that we're experiencing is simply human nature.

Some of it may be more personally conditioned, perhaps based on our own family patterns and habits, or what happened to us on the playground at school, or just how we've grown up and the conditions we were surrounded by. But a particular pattern we all have—our own flavors of—is a human tendency, a pattern of selfing.

The sense of self is an arising experience. We usually, or often, take it for being me. There's a kind of belief in it, a belief in that pattern that it is me, who I am. And yet this too is just another arising experience that can be seen. We can be curious about this sense of self, what we are thinking of as a self, what we are thinking of as a sense of self. As we begin to get curious about it, we start to see that it is not what we think it is. It's not stable. In observing the pattern, we see there's not just one thing we're calling "me." Lots of different senses of self are happening. We see it's an arising that arises and passes. One sense of self arises and passes. Another sense of self arises and passes. We see the impermanent nature of it, the conditioned nature of it, how it arises based on things happening in the world or things happening in our minds and our experience.

This seeing, this observing the sense of self like we would observe any other arising experience—with curiosity and interest—begins to undermine the kind of beliefs we have in it. It undermines those unquestioned beliefs about the sense of self. We can say that perhaps studying the sense of self, or being curious about it, doesn't have to be picked up as a project, which the word "studying" seems to imply—like, "Okay, I'm going to really study this, look at it." But it is a phenomenon that will arise, sometimes more obviously than others. And so some curiosity about what it is when it arises can be valuable.

As we are curious about a sense of self, we begin to see that it is not what we think it is. What we take to be self is not self. The Buddha talked about this sense of selfing, this process of selfing. The term translated into English is "I-making" and "my-making." He talked about it a lot through the perspective or the exploration of the five aggregates.

Carol mentioned these the other day, and I think most of you have heard talks on the five aggregates or are familiar with them at least to some extent. Just as a reminder, I'll do a very brief recap of the five aggregates to set the context for the exploration around studying selfing.

The word itself, "aggregate," is a kind of technical word that we don't use very much in English. In the Pali, the word *khandha*, I understand, is actually a much more ordinary word. It means something like "group" or "heap." But "aggregate" is actually a good word because in the suttas these five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—are described both as the results of experience, the "what" of our experience. Form is body experience, physical sensations. Feeling is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. Perception is the noticing of recognition, the perception that happens as we recognize something. Mental formations are those many emotions, moods, and thoughts. And consciousness is the simple knowing aspect of experience. The aggregates are talked about in that way, as the "what" of experience.

But they're also described as the process by which these things are experienced. So the word "aggregate" to me is interesting because it is both a noun—aggregate, like aggregate rock, which is a rock of rocks, that's kind of the image of what the aggregates are, just a group of stuff—so "aggregate" can be the experience itself. But "aggregate" is also a verb: to aggregate, to collect, to gather.

One of my favorite suttas around the aggregates describes them in terms of process, as verbs rather than as nouns. For example, it describes feeling this way: "Why is it called feeling? Because it feels. What does it feel? It feels pleasant. It feels unpleasant. It feels neither pleasant nor unpleasant." It's described as the process of feeling. All of them are described in this form of verbs.

So we can think of the aggregates as the processes of body and mind. The aggregates to me are an interesting set. They, in my understanding of the teachings, describe our conditioned experience—the happenings in our body and mind, the conditioned happenings in our body and mind. So pretty much everything we're experiencing.

There are other ways that the Buddha talks about the processes or experiences of body and mind, the six sense spaces being one of those. The aggregates are interesting to me because in terms of processes of body and mind, they describe one physical process—the process of form—and four mental processes. So this teaching on the five aggregates really teases apart the workings of the mind, how the mind experiences, how it puts experience together.

Form, the physical process of our human system, includes the physical sense bases and their objects: body, eye, ear, nose, tongue—the physical sense bases—and their objects: tactile sensations, sight, sound, smell, taste. This is a very rudimentary sense of our physical experience. The physicality of experience in the touch sense, for instance, is vibration, pulsing, tingling, heat, coolness, liquidity, moisture, hardness, softness. The physical touch sensation is not, for instance, hand or foot. That experience or recognition of hand or foot is found in the perception aggregate—that recognition.

Our physical sense bases have really quite simple input. The eye experiences form and color. Any objects that we see—wall, door—that's all perception. In my own exploration of the aggregate of form, it has been a really helpful way to begin teasing apart ways that mind and body get confused or conflated, the way the overlay of concept gets confused with the actual physical experience. We can begin to see the actual physical experience and then recognize, for instance, the sensation of pressure, and then perhaps an image of the foot as the perception. So the recognition of the form aggregate helps us begin to tease apart the physical from the mental.

And then feeling—this process of recognizing pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This aspect of experience is understood to be mental. As I said, there is one physical aggregate and four mental ones, so the aggregate of feeling is understood to be mental. Feeling tone is not inherent in the objects of experience; it depends on conditions. It is constructed based on history, conditioning, events happening in the present moment.

I saw this really clearly on one retreat while eating a meal. It was a simple meal—an apple and bean dip for an evening meal. I took a bite of the bean dip and just tasted, experienced that. I don't remember much other than the bitterness and just a little bit of the oiliness of the bean dip. I don't remember much about the pleasantness or unpleasantness I experienced there. But when I took the bite of apple, it was so pleasant—it was like the best apple I'd ever eaten, or so I thought. It was just so juicy and just the right amount of tartness and sweetness for my liking.

A couple of things happened as I ate. One is that when I had the bite of bean dip and then the bite of apple, I noticed that the intensity of the pleasantness was stronger after the bean dip. Something about the contrast, conditions on the tongue, whatever, just created conditions of more pleasantness. And then the other thing I noticed was that as I ate, the mind got used to it. It wasn't so interesting anymore, and that also reduced the pleasantness. So we can be curious about this process of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—how the mind feels experience.

And perception—again, I'm going through these really quickly—perception is that process of recognition of experience. A sight happens; form and color hit the eye, and there's a pattern there. We could say that perception depends on memory, like our mind goes and tries to find the thing from our history that is most similar. So we see something—there's the form and color—and then the mind recognizes it as chair. That recognition may happen as a word in the mind, the mind saying "chair," or it might happen as an image, or it might happen as a felt sense of sitting on a chair.

It can come in through various sense modalities. The process of perception is layered in a way.

I saw this on another retreat, watching how the mind put together perception. I was sitting just outside and turned my head, and I landed on a form. The mind recognized it in a kind of staged way, and it did it with words in the mind. It said: "green, jagged, leaf." So noticing that that process was a process in the mind—recognition, perception—different from the seeing. It was a process of recognition.

This process of recognition is very useful. We probably couldn't walk across a room without it. And it's useful to recognize that it's a happening, that it is a part of our mental process, happening all the time.

And then consciousness—usually understood to be a very simple aspect of knowing experience, just the meeting of the sense base. There are said to be six classes of consciousness, one for each of the sense bases: seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, smelling consciousness, tasting consciousness, touch consciousness, and mind consciousness. Just a simple recognition—contact of a sound with the ear, hearing consciousness arises, hearing arises. A really simple aspect of knowing.

I saved volitional formations for last. It's not usually last in the list of the aggregates, but I wanted to spend just a little bit more time with this one. In terms of the "what" of experience, this is a lot of what we're noticing: moods, emotions, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, views—all of these are mental formations. States of mind, including concentration, mindfulness, patience—all states of mind are mental formations.

What we could say is the "what" of the mental formation. The mental formations are those mental activities that include intention, include some kind of activity, agency—but not necessarily a conscious agency, not necessarily a conscious act of will. But these patterns—and we can see this, we know this actually—with something like anger: when we're caught in anger, it's like anger is doing our experience. It's shaping our experience. There's a kind of activity of anger. And likewise, there's an activity of metta that shapes our experience. This is the process side of the volitional formations—they shape our experience.

The definition of volitional formations in this verb form states that volitional formations construct the conditioned. What is the conditioned they construct? They construct conditioned form as form. They construct conditioned feeling as feeling. They construct conditioned perception as perception. They construct conditioned volitional formation as volitional formation. They construct conditioned consciousness as consciousness. So this is the engine of our experience. Volitional formations shape what happens. The sense of self is a volitional formation. It shapes our experience.

For example, just looking at anger in terms of how it shapes the other aggregates: when anger is arising, it can affect the body. We know this—it shapes the feeling of the body. I often feel pressure and heat when anger is present. It can distort the face, make it kind of ugly. Feeling tone usually becomes unpleasant with anger. We tend to perceive things through the lens of anger, perhaps seeing what someone else is doing as an attack on us, or interpreting somebody else's facial expression as meaning something when maybe they just have some pain in their gut. Our consciousness is also directed by anger. When anger is present, consciousness tends to become conscious of certain things and not of others.

Selective attention. And anger tends to construct more anger. So this is how volitional formations work. They're very potent, part of our experience and what we see and explore. How does experience condition other experience?

These five aggregates are happening all the time, whether we're mindful or not. It's like the tumbling on of our experience. Mindfulness is also a mental formation, and I almost think of it as being a mental formation that reveals the functioning of the five aggregates. Sometimes the mindfulness can come up and meet all five aggregates in a kind of broader sense of what's happening. Sometimes the mindfulness may land or connect with one of the aggregates in particular—form or feeling. Mindfulness meets just what's happening. The aggregates are happening, and when mindfulness arises, that's what it's meeting: the arising and passing, the tumbling on of these conditioned experiences.

In his second discourse, the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, the Buddha pointed to how we tend to identify, how a sense of self is created in relationship to these aggregates. The first thing he points to in the sutta is this: in terms of these aggregates, he's talking to a group of people and saying, "In terms of form, do you have control over form? Do you have control over feeling?" This is the first thing he points to. I'll read you two of these passages.

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

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

He says this for all five aggregates, pointing to the uncontrollable nature—the not inherently controllable nature—of these conditioned experiences. There are times when we have some measure of control, but not ultimate control. We cannot say, "May my mindfulness be thus." Wouldn't that be nice? "May I be continuously mindful." It's not possible to say that, because it is not self.

This is a common way that we impute a sense of self—this sense of agency, a sense of control, of ability to control. And then we suffer when it's not possible, because we feel like we failed in some way. We feel like if we were a better person, or if we were doing it right, we would be able to control this. And the Buddha says, "Well, it's not self. That's why you're not able to control it."

It's actually something of a relief. When we see that something is not controllable—oh, that's a pointer to not-self. There's so much evidence for not-self out there. The mind wanders? Evidence for not-self, right there. We don't see it as such, often. We feel like, again because of that view or belief of self, we think it's somehow a personal failing that the mind has wandered.

So control—this aspect of control—he really emphasizes this. Noticing the uncontrollable nature... we don't like that. It feels uncomfortable. But we may be able to hold it with this understanding: "Oh right, this is a pointer to not-self."

Then, for each of the aggregates in the sutta, he points to the impermanent nature of each of these aggregates. Form, impermanent. Feeling, impermanent.

Perception, impermanent. Volitional formation, impermanent. Consciousness, impermanent.

And then, because impermanent, inherently unreliable as a place to land for lasting happiness. This word *dukkha* can mean the experience of suffering, and it also can mean the inherent unreliability of experience—that it is not a place where we can land for lasting happiness. It is *dukkha* because it is not reliable. That's another translation that can be used at times for *dukkha*: the unreliability of experience. Conditioned experience arises and passes away. It does not last. Not reliable.

And then the Buddha asks a question here. He says, does it make sense to call something a self that is impermanent and unreliable?

So what is it that we call self? What is it that we think of as a sense of self? I think it often does include this kind of sense of permanence, of stability, some kind of reliability. But really, one of the ways I take this part of the sutta is as an encouragement to look at what it is that we think of as self. What is it that we take to be self? And then to look closely at it and see if it is actually functioning in the way we think it is, in terms of that belief of what self is.

We don't really articulate to ourselves very clearly what we think of as self. It's a feeling, it's a sense. So get to know the experience you're calling self when it arises. And it arises a lot—you don't have to go looking very far for it. Sometimes, as I said the other day, the experience may feel more like reactivity, and you may not have a clear sense of what the sense of self is in that reactivity. You don't have to go trying to figure out what the sense of self is in the pattern of reactivity. There will be times when the sense of self is really clear. Then begin to be curious about it. What is that? What am I calling this "me"? What am I calling this sense of me? Get to know the experience that you're calling sense of self.

The Buddha talked about identification, identity, and view—this I-making and my-making—in a four-part way of looking at each of the aggregates. Four ways to look at each of the five aggregates, so twenty different ways of a sense of identity arising. I'm not going to go through all twenty right now. I'm just going to give you the pattern and explore a couple of the ways in which we might notice this.

The first pattern of identification he points to is: I am form, feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness. I am the body. There's that sense of "I am the body." I am a mental formation—I am angry, I am miserable, I am confused. Roles or social identities are mental formations also: I'm the parent, I'm the student. These are ways that we have that sense of "I am something." I am the one who thinks, who knows, who chooses.

The second pattern is: something is mine. Form is mine. Feeling is mine. Things belong to me. Emotions are mine. Ideas are mine. At one point I suffered so much around this appropriation of a word. It was *my* word.

Other people were using the word and they weren't giving me credit for it. So much suffering. An idea is mine. What is that feeling of appropriation, that mineness? What is that? What is that like? What does that feel like?

The third pattern: I am inside of form, feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness. For me, this one has the flavor at times of feeling like I'm inside the body. Maybe that kind of sense of somehow I am this thing that's traveling around in this body. Occasionally, at times, experiencing being inside of consciousness—the sense of vast consciousness and a sense of me kind of somehow in that. Again, just ways that maybe help us see how we identify.

And the last pattern: something is inside of me. Consciousness is in me, emotions are in me. I'm big and these things are in me. Again, just being curious about how you are feeling a sense of self. It is a phenomenon, it is an arising, it is a mental formation that's arising.

So those four again, just to restate them: I am something, I am an aggregate. The aggregate is mine. I am inside the aggregate. The aggregate is inside me.

There's another teaching that the Buddha offers that I found to be a simplification in a way, a simpler way of looking at the sense of self. I can see often when there's a sense of self, it falls into one of three categories, as opposed to these twenty that the Buddha's talking about. So this is a simpler perspective. The Buddha said often of experience: we should know form is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself. Feeling is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

And so that three-part reflection: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself. The first one—this is not mine—is the way we take something to be mine, the way that we identify, that sense of appropriation again.

Then the other two I began to tease apart in my own experience just through seeing a sense of self. The first one: I am. I am this. To me, "I am" brings up the sense of the agent, the doer, the one who's in control. So that piece of the sense of control is what this speaks to. When we're identifying, we may be identifying "I am"—I am the doer, I am the thinker, I am the one who chooses, the one who decides, the one who acts. The agent of the sentence. I am.

The third one, to me, is a subtler experience. The self that feels like it's the doer—that one can be more obvious in some ways. And then this last one, "this is not myself," puts the sense of self as the object of the sentence rather than the subject of the sentence. There was one time I was observing experience and I could clearly see I was not doing consciousness, I was not doing what was going on in here. But it sure felt like it was happening to me. I went and reported that to my teacher, who was Gil Fronsdal at the time, and I said, "I can't see through this." Me, the doer, not able to see through that sense of it's happening to me. He just laughed and said, "Just notice that's how it is." Of course, of course—that's what he said.

But that kind of recognition—to me it was a subtler sense of self in a way. The sense of "I am the one who

does"—that one was easier to see and easier to release in a way. It was more obvious.

This sense of things happening to me—just another sense of me, a subtler sense of that. So there's lots of different ways that a sense of self is experienced.

I think it's useful to begin to see this. When we recognize that there are many different identities, at some point I began to see that what I took to be the sense of self—many of these senses of self were just familiar patterns of contraction. And there were a lot of different ones. I had somehow created this idea that they were perhaps pieces of one big one. But then seeing them come and go, come and go, watching familiar patterns... You know, me being the analytical, intelligent one who knows how to ask questions in the hall when other people aren't doing it right. This analytical person—that was a very strong identity. I suffered a lot around it and could see it clearly.

At one point I was watching that identity, doing walking meditation in front of IMS, watching that identity and feeling the suffering of it. Just this "analytical Andrea." And then a truck drove up. Within a second, I was not analytical Andrea anymore. I was a two-year-old just delighting in a truck. It was like—poof—that one disappeared and this one arose. It was quite startling because it had been such a sticky pattern, and then it was gone in a second, replaced by this other experience.

So we can see these patterns come and go, see their impermanent nature, begin to understand that they're not what we think they are. Identities are often conditioned patterns and habits, like that analytical one of mine, conditioned by years in school where I got rewarded. It wasn't me that made that. There were so many conditions that created that pattern—not just about me, but about how my parents were with me, how it was in school, what other kids said. So many different pressures created that sense of self.

Sometimes we can see senses of self as strategies that have been conditioned for us to navigate the challenges of life, to navigate the difficulties of life. What are your patterns, habits, strategies? How do you feel them? Again, curiosity about them as they arise.

And it doesn't have to be a pulling apart. I offer this teaching about the aggregates as a support for understanding the whole of this process of selfing, but in the exploration of the experience of it, just notice what's obvious. This sense of self, the whole thing of it—let it reveal itself, how it's functioning.

We can observe our identities and see how they shape our experience. They are mental formations. How do they shape our experience? What do they make us think? How do they make our body feel? How do they shape our actions as a sense of self arises?

So again, looking at a sense of self is probably easiest when it feels pretty obvious, when it arises more prominently, rather than trying to find a sense of self.

James Baraz tells a fun story about this. He said he was given the instruction at some point to go off and notice a sense of self. He was doing walking meditation in the basement at IMS, and he said it was all very

subtle—"Oh my, not much sense of self here, and oh, maybe there's a little sense of self there"—kind of looking for the sense of self. He was alone in the basement until somebody came down and walked by. James was doing a really slow walking, and this person walked by kind of fast. The thought that arose in his mind was, "Well, I'm doing so much better than he is." Oh! Wow, that one was obvious. There it is. You don't have to go looking for some subtle thing. Just be with your experience, and there will be times when a sense of self is really obvious.

Some emotions, some senses like "I'm right, I know how to ask questions"—that sense. See what's going on there. Certain emotions can have a sticky sense of self: shame, unworthiness, self-hatred, pride, arrogance. They contain a sense of self in them also. All of our reactive emotions have a sense of self in them. Sometimes the suffering of the reactivity—like for me with anger—the suffering of the anger was way more obvious than the sense of self in the anger.

There was at times the sense of "I'm right," but the anger was way stronger in terms of what could be seen obviously. So just notice what's clear, what's obvious.

Another interesting piece to be curious about in terms of selfing is if you notice othering happening. You start noticing, "Oh, they and them, they're doing that thing. They should, they shouldn't." When there's a sense of other, there is a sense of self. We can notice that othering as a kind of counterpoint to selfing. So be curious about othering. What's going on there?

A sense of self may also arise when there are others in our environment and it's like we think we know what they're thinking about us. That sense of being othered, that experience can be interesting to see. So just, again, be curious about where you're noticing the sense of self and what you are noticing there. You don't have to pull apart whether it's "I am inside of X" or "X is inside of me." Some of those things will become clear at times. It feels like I'm in control, feels like I am the one who is doing, I am the thing. Sometimes that is clear. Just notice what is obvious.

I think an important piece too about exploring the sense of self is not having a contentious relationship with it. We're talking about allowing experience, allowing our reactivity to be here and just be with it, be curious about it. Same thing with these senses of self—a kind of sense of honoring that it is an arising and it is worthy of our attention. There's something to learn here. The sense of self is such a powerful shaping force in our minds, as are all of the mental formations, all the volitional formations. So curiosity about how they are arising and how they are tumbling on.

And check the attitude when you're noticing a sense of self. We've got lots of opinions and ideas about them. But see if it can come back to that simple recognition: this is what's arising. What does this feel like? What's this?

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