Evening Talk: Five Aggregates and Emptiness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:00:07

This evening, I'd like to continue exploring the five aggregates, which I talked about last week. This is what we're seeing—this is our experience—so there's actually quite a bit to explore around it. The perspective I'd like to bring this evening is from a particular sutta that points to or explores the empty nature of the aggregates. I want to say something about that perspective: why it's useful, how it's helpful for us.

First, a little bit about the Theravada perspective of emptiness. My understanding of the Theravadan perspective on emptiness is that it's not a kind of metaphysical teaching, a teaching about the nature of stuff out there. As we explored a little bit around looking at perception of impermanence yesterday, the teaching is really radically pointing us to looking at the nature of our experience. And so the Theravadan perspective on emptiness is regarding the empty nature of experience—the insubstantial nature of experience, we could say. Other words that point in here: without inherent existence, empty of inherent existence. Another way to think of it is the conditioned nature of experience, the tumbling on of processes of body and mind affecting each other. No stable, nothing stable in there, nothing solid in there. In that way, experience is empty.

Perhaps think of it as empty of thingness. Every experience has an arising, and maybe there's a phrase that talks about the arising, the persisting, and passing away of experience—all experience having that trajectory, that impermanent nature. But there's the understanding that there's no thing there. So empty of thingness, empty of substantiality.

I think we can begin to see, recognize, or understand the empty nature of experience from the perspective of conditionality—seeing how a thought arises which conditions an action. No me there making that decision. Thought conditioning an action. Intention conditions action. We can see how sight conditions perception, conditions thinking. We can see this in our practice. We begin to deeply recognize that this being is just a tumbling on of these processes of body and mind.

Another way into the understanding of emptiness is through the recognition of the impermanent nature of experience—seeing the arising and ceasing, the arising and ceasing, that begins to poke holes in the idea that there's anything that's stable. So we could also say that the understanding of emptiness is: there's not a thing, there is process. The process is not nothing. The process can be recognized, can be seen. It's just not what we usually take it to be.

One of the ways the Buddha defined emptiness is in a sutta where Ananda came to the Buddha and said, "It is said that the world is empty. The world is empty, Lord. In what respect is it said that the world is empty?" And the world here—the Buddha pointed to a kind of definition of the world. He said, "Empty. It

is just this fathom-long body with its perceptions and mind that I make known the world, the arising of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world."

So this is my understanding of what the meaning of world here is: the world of experience. That's all we know of the world. This body and mind meeting—these sense organs, very sensitive sense organs being impinged, contacted by stimuli. And our mind, what we experience, is our mind's reflection of that, you could say. And so this is what, in my understanding, he means by the world.

The Buddha responds, "Insofar as it is empty of self or anything pertaining to a self, thus it is said that the world is empty." So empty of self or anything pertaining to self.

The sutta that I'm going to explore—many of you have probably heard it or heard teachings from it before. In pointing to the emptiness of the five aggregates, I think this is quite useful because, in terms of the way the Buddha speaks about emptiness as being empty of self and what pertains to self, the five aggregates are the way the Buddha pointed to how we tend to misperceive self. And so seeing the emptiness of the aggregates can help us to let go, to re-understand, to perceive more accurately what's going on here in this tumbling on of processes.

The sutta is the Lump of Foam Sutta, the one that uses the similes for the aggregates. We'll look at each one of these and explore a little bit about the analogy itself and something about how it might help us to see the empty nature of the aggregate.

The commentaries say that the Buddha was sitting on the bank of the Ganges River and he saw a lump of foam floating down the Ganges. That created the inspiration for him to give this Dharma talk. He said, "Suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. One with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial."

For what substance could there be in a lump of foam?

So too, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?

This image of a lump of foam—I haven't seen lumps of foam on the Ganges River, but I have seen them in the Pacific Ocean. I was out one day with a fellow teacher. We were taking a day away from the February retreat at Spirit Rock, and we went out to the ocean. It was a windy day, a cold day. There was a lot of wind whipping up the waves. The waves were crashing down, and there were huge lumps of foam being blown up in the air and landing on the beach. Big, huge lumps of foam.

You look at a lump of foam like that from a distance, and it looks like a form. I can imagine on the Ganges, if a big lump of foam is floating along, it's holding its shape, appearing kind of stable. From a distance it might seem quite stable. Well, these lumps of foam on the beach in San Francisco—the wind was blowing

them, and they weren't small. They were lumps of foam as big as this table here. They were coming at us, these big lumps of foam just flying down the beach. And as they were flying down the beach, they were simply disintegrating. What substance could there be in foam, in a lump of foam? It was just this ephemeral kind of process.

The Buddha doesn't mention this part so much in the sutta, but just unpacking this analogy: foam is created—at least in the Pacific Ocean, I know—in big lumps like that when there's a lot of agitation, a lot of stirring. The organic matter in the water gets stirred up and bubbles, creates a froth, and clings together. So there are conditions that come together to create this lump of foam. And there are conditions that came together to create our bodies. Pointing to the conditioned nature of experience is a big part of understanding the empty nature of the aggregates.

We can reflect on the nature of the body, and the Buddha encouraged this. There are places in the Satipatthana Sutta to reflect on the nature of the body to decay—the charnel ground contemplations. There you can really see how the body falls apart when there's no more life force in it. And the encouragement is to reflect: this too is my nature. This is the nature of the body.

We can look inwardly into the feeling, the experience of body, and feel its actual experience. We talked about this last week when I discussed the aggregates. The actual experience of body is quite dynamic. It doesn't stay still very long. We often relate to our body through a concept—hand or head or foot—and that can create a sense of stability. But when we actually feel the body, just right now maybe the hand is a good place to feel this. You just touch in and feel into the sensations. In that space that we call hand, what are the sensations happening there? Maybe even coming a little closer to a finger. Not pushing in, but just receiving. What are the sensations there?

As I explore it, it's like there's a lot of dynamics. Nothing lasts very long. Sensations are coming and going quite quickly. And those sensations are coming and going in dependence on conditions. There's the condition of the touch sense of the hands, but then there are nerve endings and the blood coursing through, and there's lots of sensations that may be experienced there.

At the sensation level, when we touch into that world of experience, we do see the impermanent and kind of bubbly, popping nature of experience. At one point, paying attention to my breath during the three-month course, the sensations of the breath just felt like bubbles popping. I remembered this analogy and went to Joseph. I said, "It wasn't just an analogy—it's like the way the body actually is. It's bubbles." He was pretty muted in his response, but I was very excited.

So yes, we can touch that kind of quality of sensations. But then our minds kind of look down at the body and say, "It looks pretty stable to me." Even as we know that cells are changing and being sloughed off and all kinds of things are changing, there's just some sense of that stability. And so some reflection can also support us here—bringing to mind that this being began as an egg and a sperm joining. That joining process began the process of cell division and then specialization of cells. I mean, we were two cells. We

weren't two cells. It's all just a process. So some reflection can also support that recognition of the conditioned or empty nature of our experience.

And what do we grasp at when we grasp at the body? This is an interesting question. When we're clinging, when we think we're clinging to body, what are we actually clinging to? Usually it's some idea. An idea of how we want our body to be. An image. Some concept there. Again, concept. Concept is a major place where, when we're not seeing concept as yet another creation of the mind, we often reify around concepts and take that concept to be the reality. And that concept-making tends to obscure the impermanent nature, the empty nature of experience. So it's interesting to look at what it is we're actually clinging to if we think we're clinging to body.

So, feeling tone. "Suppose that in the autumn when it's raining and big raindrops are falling, a water bubble arises and bursts on the surface of the water. One with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a water bubble? So too, whatever kind of feeling there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, one inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in feeling?"

So this image of a water bubble appearing when a raindrop or drop hits the water. One day I was standing in front of IMS and watching this happen. It was pouring rain and there was a puddle in the pavement that had collected because of the water. And when the water drops would hit the puddle, a little bubble would appear. It would float on the surface and then vanish. It made me laugh every time it vanished. There was one, it arose, just a sudden appearance and a disappearance. I think the laughing was because of the little bit of startle—that it looked so thing-like, and just vanished so quickly.

The commentaries mention around this particular analogy that as soon as you try to grasp one of those bubbles, it's going to go away. That part of the ephemeral nature of the water bubble—the reaching out to grasp it, you can't. It's too ephemeral.

So some of the similarities here with feeling and exploring this: similarly, like the moment that the drop hits the water, that moment of contact, very quickly the water bubble forms. The drop creates a plopping in the water, creates a little air pocket, and the water kind of hovers over that little air pocket for a while and then bursts. So with contact as a condition, there is feeling. Contact and feeling, contact and feeling—that kind of ephemeral, very fleeting experience with every contact.

The conditioned nature of that water bubble takes several things to come together for that water bubble to appear: the pond, the falling water, the contact, maybe even the rapidity—how quickly it strikes may have something to do with whether that bubble is created or not. So there are conditions that come together for the creation of that water bubble. And likewise, conditions create feeling. It's not inherent.

I mentioned this last week: feeling is not inherent in the experience. So this is an interesting exploration. What is it? Not so much to think about, but to be curious about. Something arising is pleasant, something arising is unpleasant. What's the condition for which something is pleasant? What's the condition for which something is unpleasant?

There are a couple of pieces there that are interesting to look at. There are some basic things—like, you know, if you cut yourself with a knife, that's generally unpleasant. But beyond that area of contact, there's so much area of feeling where it's not that simple. Feeling tone can depend on how we perceive something. So for instance, the classic analogy or simile of the snake and the rope.

We walk into a room and see a coiled form in a corner. It's dim, the lights are dim. We might think it's a snake, and that will produce feeling tone, probably some reactivity as well. But then if the lights come on and we see it's a rope—a misperception—the feeling tone is very different about a coiled rope in the corner. Now there may be some ideas like, "Who would leave a coiled rope in the corner of the room?" But the rope itself, what we are perceiving, is affecting how the feeling tone is experienced. This happens all the time, way more than we might think.

Views also influence feeling tone. An example of this: I was meditating one night late in my house. I had trouble sleeping, so I got up and was just meditating in the middle of the night. I began hearing this tapping noise, and there was some fear there. I could see there was some reactivity. Mostly this thinking of it as unpleasant—just like, "It's unpleasant. This is an unpleasant sound."

Then as I kept observing, I began seeing a lot of things that were going on, like an idea that the tapping was a rat in my wall. When I saw that idea, that view, that this is some creature in my wall making this sound, I could see that the feeling tone of the sound was shaped by that view. When that was seen, it was like, "Oh, there is fear here. There is this idea that there's some rat in the wall." I could see that and see there was some reactivity there. Then when I heard the tapping again, it was just neutral or even slightly pleasant, because the view had been teased out of the picture.

Originally the sense of that tapping being unpleasant seemed inherent—the sense that "this tapping is unpleasant." But seeing what is it actually? What is actually unpleasant here? So often it's view, it's an idea, it's a concept.

We can see this in spades with our fellow yogis—our ideas and views about things that they do or don't do. And it's all our own ideas in our minds. Look at where the reaction is. Look at what is actually creating or shaping that sense of feeling tone. Feeling tone, like an airy bubble, just arising and based on conditions. Again, that sense of conditionality being an important exploration around this emptiness of the aggregates.

Now, perception. "Suppose that in the last month of the hot season, at high noon, a shimmering mirage appears. One with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear

to be void, hollow, and insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mirage? So too, whatever kind of perception there is, whether past, future, present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, one inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, and insubstantial. For what substance could there be in perception?"

I love this analogy of the mirage. I actually did a little bit of looking at how a mirage actually works. The classic mirage of seeing water in a desert—the way it works is that there's heat shimmering off of the desert. It creates something that produces a kind of reflective surface, the shimmering heat. Maybe there's a little bit of moisture in the air creating the conditions for the reflection. And what you're seeing when you see water, when you think you're seeing water on the desert from a distance, is a reflection of the sky on the surface there. It looks like water.

You can take a picture of a mirage—it's an optical phenomenon. It's not completely nothing, and it is actually a reflection of something. That's the piece I think is so interesting about this analogy. Because our perceptions are the best our minds can do in the moment to recognize experience. But it's a reflection of experience, not the experience itself.

The deceiving power of the mirage is that if you take it to be reality, you're going to go running after it, and it's always going to recede because of the way mirages work, and you're never going to get to water. There's no water there. But the mirage is deceptive in that it makes you think there might be water there. So it's a misperception—there's something actually being reflected, it's reflecting the sky, but the mind is taking it to be something that it's not.

And that is what we tend to do—this is where delusion enters into perception. We tend to take our perceptions to be reality. We don't even consider that what we're experiencing is our mind's creation. We simply take it to be what's out there.

So perception is empty of substantial nature. It's not what we're taking it to be. And yet, as I said last week, perception does a pretty good job. It does a pretty good job of reflecting what's out there. Perception itself is a useful and necessary process for us to navigate the world. So we're not trying to get rid of it, but we do want to not misunderstand it. We want to have an understanding that what we are experiencing—the perceptions, actually everything we're experiencing—is constructed in our minds. That's all that's going on. We're experiencing what's constructed in our mind.

We can see the process of perception. I talked about this last week: hearing a sound, you may see in the mind an image of what the sound is, that representation. It may be an accurate reflection, or it may not be. But we often do, I think partly because perception does such a good job much of the time, take the concepts to be reality. There's a kind of reification—it's like, "This is what is out there." This is a key way we take perceptions to be substantial, this kind of assuming. It's a belief, an assumption of their reality.

This mistake is easier to see when perception makes an error. This has been a fun part of my own

practice—to be curious about this, to recognize when perception makes a mistake and see what happens.

I'll keep this one brief. There was one point when I was at Shwe Oo Min, hearing a squealing sound at night—actually in late evening, at dusk. It sounded, my perception was, that it was a pig. The squealing was like the sound of a pig, so that was my perception. The sound seemed kind of distressed, and so my mind created the story that this pig was being butchered. I imagined there was a butcher shop on the other side of the wall from the monastery and that this was happening each evening—they were butchering the pig for market the next day. That was my story.

Now, I knew that was a story. I knew that I did not actually know there was a pig being butchered there. But there was still compassion arising for that imagined pig.

Then one night, instead of meditating in my room, I was out walking at dusk at that time, and there were these bats flying very close, and they were squealing. So that squealing I had heard was not a pig—it was a bat.

This was so instructive, because now I knew that the whole thing about the butcher shop, all of that, was a concoction of the mind. But I had not had a clue that the idea that it was a pig was also a concoction of the mind. That was quite something. Perception had made a mistake.

I'm thinking about that snake-rope analogy—the perception of the coiled form is a snake, the perception of the coiled form is a rope. Different experiences arise based on those perceptions. So again, to see that kind of belief in our perceptions as reality—this is not easy to see. But we can begin to be curious about perception.

On one retreat, Sayadaw talked about perception so much that it just became what I started to be curious about. So much of the understanding I have around perception came not because I was looking for it, but because it was in the field during that particular retreat.

Now, mental formation. "Suppose someone seeking heartwood, needing heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood, would take a sharp axe and enter a forest. There they would see the trunk of a large plantain tree, straight, fresh, without fruit bud core."

They would cut it down at the root, cut off the crown, and unroll the coil. As they unroll the coil, they would not find even softwood, let alone heartwood. One with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in the trunk of a plantain tree?

So too, whatever kind of volitional formations there are—whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one inspects them, ponders them, and carefully investigates them. As they investigate them, they appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in volitional formations?

This image of the plantain tree is wonderful. They're big. I lived in the South Pacific, and there were banana trees there. They have big fat trunks. They look really stable, really solid. You can come up and knock against them—they're hard. They look pretty stable. But if you chop one down, it's just these sheaves, layers and layers and layers, this coil that's described in the sutta. Layer upon layer upon layer. The sheaves are pretty rigid, kind of stiff, and there's layer upon layer of these rigid sheaves. But if you take each one apart, there's nothing solid in terms of wood. It's just a pile of leaves in front of you. You can't use it for wood.

This analogy for me also points to the experience of mental formations—just feeling layered, especially with some of these deep, sticky, old habit patterns we have. How layered they are. And the rigidity of the sheaf—those patterns get kind of stiff. They're layered upon layered upon layer, and we interpret them to be a thing, or solid, or "It's been here forever, it's the way I've always been."

But then as we start to observe our mental formations, we see they're just one on top of another. They condition each other, they kind of weave together, but it's all just mental formation and mental formation and mental formation, layering on itself. Sometimes when I think about exploring this, I mention that sense of stepping back. It's just a big mess. Can you just know the big mess? And as we observe that big mess, we see that it's not stable. We feel the kind of movement in there, the different pieces of reactivity, different kinds of mental habits and formations. We see that shifting quality of it. And we begin to understand it's not heartwood. It's not who I am. It's not me—it's just processes unfolding.

Again, the believing aspect seems to come into many of the ways in which we take these aggregates to be stable—believing the substantiality of them, believing the me-ness of them. The belief kind of holds that plantain tree together. The belief holds all of those different sheaves together.

So seeing or recognizing what's being believed, connected with a whole pattern of layered reactivity—that's been so helpful in my own practice. I've mentioned it before, but I'll mention it again because it is so powerful. What is being believed? Seeing a deep, deep pattern of self-hatred arising—it's like watching a banana tree being created right in the moment, this big stiff thing. But seeing the belief there: it's just a thought that's being believed. That's all that's happening here. That's all that's happening.

And then consciousness. "Suppose that a magician or a magician's apprentice would display a magical illusion at a crossroads. One with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in magical illusion? So too, whatever consciousness there is—whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in consciousness?"

This is an interesting simile.

All the others are more about natural processes, natural things. This one brings in a being, this simile—an

intentionality of weaving a spell. I'm not sure I've completely unpacked this in my own understanding, but there are a couple of pieces that feel resonant to me in this analogy.

A magician weaves together many different things and pulls focus so that you're not seeing where the illusion is created. There's so much going on in this magical illusion. And then when something appears in some fashion, we haven't seen how it was created. The focus had been pulled; we hadn't seen how it came to be. There are conditions that had it come to be—it didn't just magically appear. But that's the illusion: that it just magically appears.

There's something of that in how our minds deceive us, how delusion deceives us into taking things to be solid and real and stable. We haven't seen them come to be. They are just there, and we take them as if they've always been there.

Another piece of this illusion relates to consciousness itself. Consciousness is this simple knowing aspect of experience—six kinds of consciousness: seeing consciousness, smelling consciousness, tasting, touching, hearing, and mind consciousness. But we often don't experience them as individual streams. When I look at the wall, I see the wall, and I'm not going to go running fast at that wall because I know it's hard based on my experience of walls before. The mind, in seeing that wall, has created the understanding—and it's a valuable one—that it's solid. The seeing of the wall and the solidity, the hardness, the touching of that wall are woven together in my mind.

I think this is how consciousness weaves together all of our senses into a coherent experience. This is a piece of the magic show of our minds. Again, the processes of mind are just these streams that our mind is putting together, really helpfully, to help us navigate the world. But it is all just the creation of our minds.

Let me say a little more about consciousness, because I didn't talk about this too much last time. Consciousness, this bare aspect of knowing, is different from awareness or mindfulness. I'm using awareness and mindfulness synonymously here. Mindfulness is different from consciousness in that mindfulness may or may not be arising in the present moment. Consciousness is arising in every moment, whether we are mindful or not.

We can be lost in thought and still walking down the street because consciousness, feeling, and perception, as Sayadaw will say, are doing their jobs. Mindfulness doesn't have to be there to navigate the world in that way. Consciousness in that way is arising and helping our system take care of itself—to know that you're getting ready to walk into a tree, for instance. Consciousness, feeling, and perception help us navigate the world. So every moment of experience will arise with consciousness; mindfulness will come and go.

Now, being mindful of consciousness—this is interesting. Every moment of experience has the moment of knowing, the consciousness of hearing, and there's the hearing itself. There's the hearing, the object, and the consciousness. Every moment has both of those things: the object and the consciousness. There's the

hearing and the knowing of hearing. There's the sound and the knowing of hearing. There's the sight and the knowing of seeing. There's a mind state and the knowing of the mind state. Every object has both: the object and the knowing of it.

Mindfulness can recognize the object side, and it can recognize the knowing side. My understanding is that mindfulness basically uses the five aggregates to reflect them back on themselves. Mindfulness uses consciousness, feeling, and perception to reflect all of the aggregates back on themselves. It's hard to talk about, but I'll do the best I can here.

In terms of recognizing the knowing, which is useful for seeing the processes of body and mind—what's going on here?—awareness can recognize the knowing itself. It can recognize the knowing; it can recognize the object. We might play with this a little bit. This is not something we force. For me, this tends to happen especially if there's been a dharma field of exploration around this topic; then the mind may start to recognize the knowing side.

But trying to find it is probably not so helpful. We may, however, be able to recognize that there's body sensation—there's the contact, there's the pressure—and then there is knowing of that.

I'm going to offer you an image that was helpful for me in this way of seeing, this understanding that every experience can reveal the knowing. It's there. It's not like we have to find it. It's already there.

I was sitting a retreat at Cloud Mountain during the winter, and it was quite cold. It had snowed three days in a row and hadn't gotten above thirty-two degrees. The air was really clear, and the sun finally came out one afternoon and started to heat up the snow that had gathered on the trees. It was really light snow—so light I could just blow it away. About eight inches deep, but it would just poof. Really light and crystalline. As the sun hit the trees, the snow started to fall off in great clumps. Walking through the woods, I'd hear this clump, then another.

That afternoon I was sitting and looking out my window into the courtyard. One of these snowfalls came right through the courtyard, and as the snow fell through, it illuminated sunlight that was streaming through—sunlight that had not been apparent. I was startled by that. There's sun out there? It looked like it was just shadow. The entire courtyard appeared to be in shade. I walked out onto the deck and leaned over, and there were two patches of sun underneath the deck. So there was sunlight streaming through the courtyard that was not visible in the air. There was no dust. You know how you can often see sunlight when there's dust? There was none. So it just looked like shade. But then as the snow fell through it, the light was revealed.

We often think of light as illuminating objects. In this case, the object illuminated the light.

That became a kind of meditation image for me. The object illuminates the knowing. I don't have to think of it as the knowing illuminating the object. The object can help the mind see the knowing. This image was supportive for that understanding—the recognition that there are just objects and knowing, objects and

knowing, objects and knowing.

I think this simile of the magic show is truly appropriate when considering the entirety of our experience. This believing process is like the magician's wand—everything becomes solid and stable through it. And yet it's all just processes constructed in the mind. We can start to see this nature of experience as void, hollow, insubstantial. Just processes tumbling on. That's all.

I'll close with a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh: "For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them." We could change that word "views" to "beliefs." For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our beliefs about them.

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