The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:43

The subject of the talk tonight is the five aggregates are not self. In the talk this evening, I want to suggest that fundamentally you don't exist—at least not in the way that you might think that you do. So all of those who are desperate about holding on to existence, you might want to go now because this concept is going to be somewhat challenged this evening.

You probably know that in Buddhism this unexamined sense of I or self is considered one of the biggest misunderstandings that we have in life. It's a core component of the quality of ignorance that's the start of the chain of dependent origination that leads to suffering. The way things actually are is so much lighter than the way things feel when we're burdened by this sense of self.

So seeing into this false sense of I and being able to let it go is the doorway to a lot of personal freedom for us that each of us as meditators has access to. This is not something that waits until you're just on the edge of full awakening. This is a lightening that you can feel year by year in your practice.

In my own personal experience of looking into this question of self, it's taken some years of looking, reflecting, examining my experience to get clearer and clearer on it. So I hope you won't have an expectation that it should all be clear from one talk tonight. And I say that for two reasons. One is I don't want you to think too hard about this as we're going. Just don't think, "I've got to figure it all out tonight or I'm going to miss it entirely." Just kind of take the words and concepts in and see where they resonate for you and open to just a slight shift in your way of seeing. And secondly, so that you don't get too concerned if it doesn't make a lot of sense. Some of this stuff is hard to comprehend on our conceptual level and matching it against our experience. So take it really slowly if some of these concepts are new for you and realize this is a topic for ongoing investigation.

For most of us, I is the center of our universe. It's what everything revolves around. Like in the old days, it was considered the earth was the center of the universe and the sun and all the planets revolved around it. For us, the I is the center of that universe. Our thoughts revolve around it. Our actions, our speech, our values, our emotions, our direction in life—all comes out of this sense.

This I is completely taken for granted by most of humanity. And even for us as meditators, it seems very obvious. It seems very self-evident, doesn't it? I mean, what could be more natural than I? We use it all the time. We think about it. We adopt it. Here we are, this sense of I. William James put it this way: "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat."

In your examination over these weeks on retreat where you've been looking closely at sights and sounds,

smell, taste, touch, thinking, and emotions, have you come upon this I yet? Something that seems so obvious, the center of everything—have you found it? Probably not. It's very elusive when we start to look.

The Dalai Lama said, "It's a sure sign of delusion when you think something is really apparent, but you go to find it and you can't." Then we know that something's confused in our minds.

The classical analogy in the tradition is we look at a piece of rope that's lying on the ground, a multicolored twined piece of rope, and we think it's a snake. And when we see it as a snake, we get really afraid. "Oh, it could jump up, it could bite me, it could crawl on me." We draw back. But that's just a misperception. When we see clearly that it's just a piece of rope, all the worry goes out.

In the same way, it's said when we hold this concept of self, we tie ourselves up in a burden that agitates us. And when we see things the way they are, then we're calm. The truth frees us.

It's easy to draw out some of the confusion around this concept of I. So let's just look at language. I want to ask you a couple of questions. The first is, how tall are you? It is not a trick question. So if I ask you, "How tall are you?" that's pretty easy to answer, right? So I would say I'm five feet, ten inches tall. Very straightforward.

We could hear it every day: "I'm five foot ten." But really what we're saying is the body is five foot ten, right? My thoughts aren't five foot ten. My emotions aren't five foot ten. My mindfulness isn't five foot ten. My body is five foot ten. So here we're saying I am the body, which is five foot ten. There's an identification: I am the body, and that's five foot ten.

Or I could ask you a second question: what color are your eyes? And that's easy, right? You don't have to think too long about that. So I would say my eyes are brown. Here, all of a sudden, I'm not the body—I'm the owner of the eyes. They're my eyes and they're brown.

So which are you truly? Are you the body or are you the owner of the body who's somehow separate from it? Which is right? Could you be both?

If you're the body and your hair is cut and falls on the ground, is that you lying on the ground? Do you feel it as you? Do you feel attached to it?

We could do the same thing with the mind. Sometimes we would say, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad," and then we're equating I with the emotions. So we say, I am the state of mind. Other times we might talk about "my joys and my sorrows," and now we're the owner of the emotion. So which are you, the emotion or the owner?

At other times we feel ourselves really as the observer. We really think most deeply, perhaps, that we're located somewhere just behind the eyes, in the middle of the head, maybe inside that mass of brain tissue. And we look out through these eyes onto the world and experience everything that comes in. So this eye that's at the center of everything is like the observer that experiences sights and sounds and smells and

tastes and so forth. And this eye—this observing kind of eye—is also considered to be the one who does the thinking or the one who does the feeling. So here there's the sense I am the observer.

These are five distinct ways we use the word I: the body, the owner of the body, the emotions, the owner of the emotions, or a central observer that everything's happening to. Could they all be true? Yet we use the words like this every day and we never stop to question what the underlying reality is.

In fact, they're all rubbish. Every one of those positions is rubbish.

The Buddha put it this way: "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." Or another of my teachers put it a little more directly when he said, "Everything you think is wrong."

A yogi a couple of years ago told me something that he'd heard on the radio, which I thought was a good reminder for all of us. We need to stay humble in this practice. You know, when we hear things like "everything you think is wrong," that's a humbling kind of statement. Well, this is something he'd heard on the radio. A commentator said, "The mind—often wrong, seldom in doubt."

This is really true in our relation to self. So this sense of I is basically a concept that's been created by our thoughts. And it's a fiction. Things aren't like that. But it's a fiction that we've believed in a lot and we've placed at the center of everything. So this is a form of delusion, and we've become entranced by this delusion of I.

It's created in us a deep self-centeredness. As we return to it again and again, we strengthen that sense when we don't see the true reality of things. We invest in it and strengthen the sense of self-centeredness and self-cherishing that grows out of that. So we create a world where obviously I am more important than you, and the whole world behaves that way: I am more important than you. So we see how the whole world is under the spell of this same delusion.

And then we dance to the tune of this false sense of self. And what's the tune? There are three main chords: greed, aversion, confusion. This is the song of the self.

Just one slight hint of the suffering that's involved—as long as we believe in this "I" and are invested in it, we'll be afraid of death. But by seeing the limited nature of this false concept, we can, to a certain extent, free ourselves from that concern. So undoing this level of delusion is one of the main pieces of work that meditation leads us to.

An interesting question is: how was it that the Buddha saw? When he saw the nature of things in a liberated way, in an enlightened way, what did he see that was different?

Just looking around the room tonight, when we look at this assembly, we probably see people. I would suspect that most of you, as you look around, see person, person, person, person. In the Visuddhimagga, it's said that that alone is a sign of insufficient reflection. They said that one who has reflected deeply does not see "person."

It would be like a skilled butcher who has been working at carving up animals for many years, putting a cow on the carving table, and as he's cutting, saying "cow, cow, cow." A skilled butcher doesn't cut in that way. The butcher goes: rump, tenderloin, sirloin, ribs—because he knows the details of this creature so well. He doesn't just lump it under the term "cow." He sees the component parts.

So one who looks at a human being who has reflected deeply doesn't just see the lump "person," but sees in more detail than that.

So how did the Buddha see in more detail? When the Buddha looked at our human experience, he tended to see in one of two ways. The first is something that I think I mentioned in the first talk during this retreat: the six sense bases. This is from the Sutta on Totality. I think I read that night: "Monks, what is the totality of existence? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you. It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and touches, the mind and mind objects."

We've talked about this a lot—the six senses—and they fit very nicely in with our meditation practice because this is the way the instructions unfold. We direct the attention to sounds, to body sensations, to sights, to mind objects like thoughts and emotions, or to smells and tastes. The Buddha used this description primarily to teach people how to cut through craving, because craving tends to arise for pleasant objects at the six sense doors, and it's helpful to look how we get entangled with different objects at different sense doors—sometimes sight, sometimes touch, sometimes taste, and so forth.

But there was another description that he used, I would say equally often in the suttas, and that is the description that's called the five aggregates. This is another way to see a human being, and this is the outline that I want to talk about tonight. This device he used to cut through wrong view.

We have the sense that the "I" is somehow to be found in this mass of changing phenomena. In order to establish us in the right view—the fictitious nature of that "I"—the Buddha most often used the five aggregates. As we tune into this way of seeing, we start to see human beings without the overlay of the false sense of "I," or what you might call the ego. The ego and false sense of "I" are more or less synonymous.

So as we start to look at the world through this map, we see things the way the Buddha saw. And that is a very interesting exploration. This is going to sound technical as I get into the description. It may sound a little too intellectual, but I want to assure you it's not. It becomes very experiential as you live with these categories.

The time in my life that this opened up for me—actually it was about fifteen years ago now—my older sister died quite unexpectedly at a fairly young age. She was fifty-two at the time. She had had some health problems, but she was not close to death. And then unexpectedly, she went into a coma and never awoke. It was quite a shock for her family and for me.

I was quite close to this sister, and one of the most startling things about her dying was that she had

seemed so real and vibrant and alive just a week before. I'd been talking to her on the phone. I'd gotten a photograph of her around that time. She seemed so alive and real and present, and my mind was just stunned at how she could go from that lively manifestation to no longer existing. I just couldn't put it together how that could be.

So I became very interested in investigating this question of what makes up a human being. And in this investigation, it helped me understand how we go from vitality to non-existence, possibly in a short period of time.

So it was very helpful for me to understand what's involved in dying. And then it also gave me a lot more freedom in my own life through that understanding. Again, it's an exploration that takes some time. Tonight, I just want to lay out the map and encourage you to simply reflect and play with it a little bit.

The term aggregate is a translation of the Pali word khanda. In Sanskrit, the term is skandha, so you might hear from a Tibetan group the five skandhas. It's the same teaching. And again, it's a fairly simple word in Pali—it just means heap or bundle.

So aggregate sounds kind of technical to me, like it should be a formula that people use in mixing up road paving material, you know, a little of stone and a little of gravel and a little asphalt and a little cement. But the word that I really like to translate khanda as is kind of stuff. Really what it's saying is we are made of five kinds of stuff. So that's what I'm going to be talking about tonight, the five kinds of stuff that make us up. If aggregate feels too technical, just think of it as a kind of stuff.

These five aggregates are material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. I want to go through them one by one and talk about what they mean. Generally, they're all present—all five are present in every moment of experience. It's the same domain that's covered by the six sense bases, but just sliced up a little differently. For example, in the six sense bases, there may be a moment where there's no particular smell or taste or sound, so some of the sense bases may be absent. In the aggregates, all five of these are present in every moment of conscious experience. It's just divided up a little differently.

The first aggregate is material form, or often we'll just call it form. The Pali word is rupa. Rupa is sometimes taken to mean body, and this is in many ways the most interesting kind of material form that we have to look at or work with. It's sometimes used as body. A statue like this one behind me in Asia is often referred to as a Buddha rupa, the form of the Buddha or the body of the Buddha as a statue.

But this is the way the Buddha defined it: Any kind of material form whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—this is the material form aggregate.

One of the things it includes is the body. This is one type of material form. It includes all the other matter that makes up the physical universe. This is all included in the material form aggregate. But it also

includes the interactions among matter. If this bit of matter contacts this bit of matter, we get a sound, and that sound is also in the realm of rupa. All the interactions among the sense doors, like tastes and smells, touches—those are all in the area of rupa. So the five physical senses and their objects and all the physical created universe is all under this heading of rupa or form. It's sometimes also translated as materiality.

An interesting question is the body is so taken for granted. It's like the base of life. But how do we know the body? How do we know it's here? Well, mostly it's by the fact that we see it. We see our own body and we experience sensations through it. Now the fact is the body also has smells and tastes and sounds, but some of those are not always so pleasant, so we don't tend to dwell on those too much. The primary way we contact the body is through seeing it and touching it. So the body is also just known through these senses. This sound is in the aggregate of rupa, or form. It's part of material form. That's the first aggregate.

All the other four aggregates are on the side of mind, or mentality. The first of these is feeling tone. The Pali word is vedana, and this was introduced in the meditation instructions about a week ago. It's a quality that every moment of sense experience has of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The reason vedana is important is because it forms the basis for grasping and clinging. When things are pleasant, we tend to hold onto them with greed, or the pleasantness becomes the basis for the reactive formation of desire. When things are unpleasant, that becomes the basis for the reactive formation of aversion.

And when things are neither pleasant nor unpleasant, we tend to overlook them. They don't please us or displease us. They're considered irrelevant to our gratification. And so this becomes the basis for delusion, for being disconnected or out of touch, for ignoring.

So if we have this sound as our sense experience, generally that's a pleasant sound. I think most people who heard that would say that's pleasant. Because of its meaning, the sitting's over, it's really pleasant. There are eight pleasant times it happens during a day, and we really like it.

But it's curious, too, that this quality of vedana is put in the mind category rather than the category of the sound itself. And that's because the feeling tone of being pleasant or unpleasant or neither is not actually inherent in the item, in the phenomenon at the sense door, like the sound, but it's received in the mind. One of our teachers said that the mind is actually feeling as a verb—to give that phenomenon its feeling tone, that we interact with it and taste it and give it a feeling. It's not done consciously. Often it's almost immediate that we know the feeling tone. But he's suggesting there's an active participation.

I'll give you a little example of how this works. When I grew up, my mother really liked the music of Mantovani. If you remember, he was a popular conductor of music from movies, from soundtracks, and they'd be sort of sentimental melodies, and they'd be scored with a lot of strings and very lush, swelling instrumentation, and it'd be a little bit sentimental. So I listened to a lot of Mantovani when I was growing

up. And it was okay. I didn't mind it too much.

Down in Southern California, there was a 7-Eleven that was having a problem with drug dealers coming and doing their business in the parking lot. And they'd call the police, and the police would come and chase the dealers away. But the police would drive off, and the dealers would come back. And they'd ask them politely to leave, and they wouldn't. So the store owner got an idea, which was to play through the speakers of the outside music system, Mantovani. So he put on Mantovani and turned up the volume and flooded the parking lot. And that drove the drug dealers away. Because while my mother experienced that as very pleasant, the dealers experienced that as very unpleasant. So they left.

Well, it's curious. This feeling tone is somehow interpreted differently in each of our minds, depending on our conditioning.

The third of the aggregates, the second mental aggregate, is this quality of perception called saññā. Sally talked about it a lot in her last talk. Carol talked about it some more in her talk following that. And it is basically this factor of recognition that when a sense phenomenon appears to us we tend to recognize it and put it into a category that we already know based on memory. This happens so quickly and so automatically for us as grown-ups that we don't see it taking place, but it's happening all the time.

For instance, if your eyes are open and you're looking around the room right now, you are probably seeing what's here as women and men and zabutons and floor and ceiling and statue and flowers and bell and so forth. This is all a level of conceptualization that's happening above the bare sense experience. Actually all that's happening in the visual field are patches of form and color, form and color. You get more of a sense of this if you close one eye and you lose some of the depth perception. And then you see the way painters need to see when they're learning to see anew—throw out the old habits and see things in a fresh way.

When we grow up, we learn to perceive these categories of concepts as our parents and teachers tell us to. So we learn how to recognize women and men and chairs and floor and things like that. But those are not inherent to the visual field. We forget that this is really happening, but Oliver Sacks, the neurologist, tells a story that makes it really clear.

He was able to work with a patient who had lost his sight when he was quite young, a few years old. But with the technology of surgery that was available as he grew up, his sight was able to be corrected. So as a middle-aged man, he had his sight restored. And Sacks was there in the hospital with the patient when the bandages were taken off after the operation. And the man's family was there, and the surgeon was there, and Sacks was there, and everybody was just expecting this, wow, it's so fabulous to see again, I can't thank you enough.

So they took off the bandages and there was no real expression from the patient. And he later explained that all he saw was a blur of shapes and colors that had no meaning for him. And that the first thing that

started to make sense was this flesh-colored blob that started moving toward his face that seemed to emanate a sound saying, can you see me? And he just deduced that that was probably the face of his surgeon because he recognized the voice. But this blur of form and color made no sense to him. He did a lot of exercise and a lot of practice, and he got much better at functioning in the world, but his perception never became automatic the way it is for us.

He always had to struggle to make sense of the shapes and colors that he saw.

So then we realize this is a learned faculty, but it's necessary for our functioning in the world. We don't need to get rid of it. We don't need to change it. But we need to appreciate it, and sometimes we need to question it. I think Sally and Carol both talked about how sometimes it leads us astray. We perceive things inaccurately. We see a snake where there's a rope. Or, as the Buddha said, we tend to see permanence where there's impermanence. We tend to see lasting happiness where there's *dukkha*. And we tend to see a self where there isn't one. So these are the kinds of perceptions that we need to straighten out.

When we put a label on something and perceive it, such as a pain in the body, sometimes the label can block us from a fresh experience of that. So sometimes we need to look beyond our first perception and find out what's the reality of that.

Zen is full of stories about this, because in Zen, they're trying to train practitioners to see things fresh. So you'll read stories where the Zen master holds this up and says, "What is this? If you call it a stick, I will hit you. But if you say it's not a stick, I will also hit you." What I deduced from that is that if I went into Zen, I was going to get hit a lot. So I chose Vipassana.

But really what they're trying to get the practitioner to do is to see this thing before concept, before made-up terms. Like take this thing. You look at it probably ten times a day. I look at it and I think "bell." But couldn't it equally be a flower pot? Or how about a monk's bowl? This would be a very nice alms bowl—just enough food for me for lunch. Or if it was put on a statue, couldn't this be a fancy chapeau? Wouldn't this make a nice hat for someone? So just calling it "bell," we kind of miss all the potential that's in there.

There was a funny story about this. In the early seventies, two great masters from different traditions were both in Cambridge at the same time. Some of their students knew each other and thought, "Wow, wouldn't it be fun to bring together these two enlightened masters and just watch their minds kind of meld in this recognition of each other's emptiness?"

So the two masters were Kalu Rinpoche from the Tibetan tradition and Sansanim, who was a Korean Zen master. They met at a house of one of our friends, sat down and had tea together, and Sansanim decided to challenge Kalu Rinpoche. He took an orange off a plate where they'd been served for tea, and he held it up to Rinpoche and said, "What is this?" in that very straightforward Zen style, because in Sansanim's lineage, this is the way one trained. One trained to answer questions like "What is this?" And that became

a measure of one's dharma understanding.

That was not the case in Kalu Rinpoche's lineage. And so he just sat there doing his mala beads and looking at Sansanim, completely unperturbed, but also kind of not quite getting it. And so Sansanim held the orange up again and again said, "What is this?" And Kalu just quietly turned to his translator and said, "Don't they have oranges in Korea?"

So this is another case of perception, different in different cultures. In our case, we hear this, we recognize it as a sound, and we recognize it generally as the bell. And that has a particular meaning for us. It means the sitting's over, we can get up and move. So that recognition is very important. It's very functional in our days here.

The third of the aggregates—the mental aggregates, the fourth aggregate in total—is called volitional formations or mental formations. The Pali word is *saṅkhāra*. They're also sometimes called urges or impulses. This is a very broad category, and it basically includes all the kinds of states of mind that we've been talking about: the qualities of moods, emotions, the refined meditative states of mind, such as mindfulness and concentration, equanimity.

These are all included in sankhara. Sankhara also refers to actions that stem from the mind—that's why they're sometimes called volitional. So actions of thought, of speech, and of body are included in this category of sankharas.

Because of the link to action, this is also the field of karma. Remember that when Joseph introduced the factor of intention, he talked a little about how that becomes the seed of karma. So sometimes these things are called karmic formations, and that's why they also have the sense of impulses. The movements of greed and aversion are impulses that come from this field of sankharas. Similarly, the movements of loving-kindness or compassion or generosity—wholesome qualities that come from this field of sankharas or impulses.

So when we hear the bell at the end of a sitting, notice what happens in the sankharas. Often there's this real sense of ease that comes in: "Oh, I'm so comfortable now. I could sit forever." This sense of ease that comes in response to the sound and the thought "I could sit forever"—these are sankharas that happen with that moment of hearing.

The last of the aggregates is the quality of consciousness. In Pali, the word is vijñana. This is that most bare kind of knowing that we've been talking about a few times—just the bare receptivity to sense phenomena before they're interpreted, before they're perceived, before we're mindful of them. So the knowing of the sound as a sound—that simple level is what's called consciousness.

It's understood that the sound and the knowing come together. This is an important point that we'll probably come back to in other talks. When that sound arises in your experience, you can't really separate your knowing of it from the sound appearing, can you? The sound appearing to you is your knowing of it.

They're right together. If a tree fell in a forest and there was no one to hear it, there might be sound vibrations, but there wouldn't be that human experience of hearing a sound arise. So it takes that consciousness plus the phenomenon, and then they come together in our experience.

I like to think of it as receiving this—it's a unitary experience, but it's got two facets. One is the sound, which is rupa, a physical phenomenon in our language. But it's received by this quality of mind called consciousness. They are together, but we can look either at the mind side of it or the rupa side of it. They're both there. It's just one experience.

So we say all five aggregates are present in every moment of experience. In our little example, the sound is rupa. The feeling tone of pleasantness is vedana. The recognition of it as the meditation bell is perception or samjna. The mood of ease that comes when we hear that is a sankhara. And consciousness knows all those other four. Consciousness holds the rupa. Consciousness holds the feeling tone. Consciousness holds the perception. And consciousness holds the sankhara that comes. They're all there in that moment.

These are the five categories that make up the kinds of stuff that form our human experience. I invite you to consider: Is there anything in your human experience that is outside of these five categories? Anything in your direct experience that wouldn't be able to be included somewhere in these five? In other words, is this an exhaustive description of our human experience?

[Student asks about karma]

Karma is only known, in the Buddha's description of it, through action. So when a thought arises that is motivated by generosity, that could be said to be a karmic act, because it has the volition of generosity. The karma is implicit in the sankhara.

Now, one of the questions that philosophers have debated for centuries—and this may be what you're pointing to—is where do those karmic seeds reside? Because one person's personality may be conditioned toward generosity, and others may be conditioned toward stinginess. So it became a very interesting philosophical question.

Where do those patterns live when they're not being activated? Do you get the question? It's a very interesting question. Different schools answered that question differently, but the Buddha chose not to even pose the question or answer it because he was really just concerned with what do I experience. And we experience karma when it expresses itself through an impulse—generosity, stinginess, greed, aversion, and so forth.

So I'll leave you to reflect further, but let's say for the time being that this constitutes an exhaustive description of the categories of our experience. You can reflect later and see if that's true or not. Everything that makes up our human experience can be put in one of these categories.

Why is that important? Because there's one interesting thing that's missing, and that is the I, capital I. It's not included in any of these. In this map, there is form, there is feeling tone, there is perception, there are mental impulses, and there is the knowing of all of those. There is no category for a self, for an I.

So once we start to explore this particular map, once we decide that it's an exhaustive map, then we can start to believe maybe there's not a need for an I in our understanding of human experience. Maybe there isn't an I except as a thought. There can be the thought of an I or the sense of an I—maybe that's all there is. And what really makes us up is form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

The traditional analogy that was used to explain why this was important was the chariot. I'm sure a lot of you have heard this. You take a look at a chariot that's put together and you're asked, well, what is the chariot? Is it the axle? Is it the wheels? Is it the cart? Is it the steering handle? You can't say that it's any of those. It's kind of the way all of them have been put together. A simpler example—the modern equivalent, by the way, is car. So if you want, you could analyze a car and all of its components and ask, where's the car?

But a simpler example, because we're just here together—everybody, I hope, can see this, and you don't have any trouble identifying it as a very common object of daily use, called a pen. Right? Everybody agree this is a pen? But we can start to take this pen apart. That was the cap. This is the tip. This is the ink cartridge. This is the barrel. And this is the end. There are five different parts. And if I could, I'd squeeze the ink out of here and you'd see there's something else in here too.

Now where's the pen? Does it exist? Does it really exist as an object? Or is it only a conventional designation that we give to this assemblage of parts when they're assembled in a certain way and function as kind of a unity? That is, there's the appearance of an object, but we know that the object is nothing more than an assembly of these different parts. There's no pen there apart from the parts. There's no essence to this. There's no little piece somewhere in the center—oh, this is the real pen. This is the magic essence of pen. There are only these parts that are put together.

Now, five might be a little too complicated for the human experience. Let me suggest, just look at three parts. The body, very fundamental piece of us. That's one part. Second piece, also very fundamental, is consciousness. There's an aliveness and awareness within each of us. That's why we're sentient beings. And the third piece are the things that go through our minds—the emotions, moods, states of mind. And we'll just toss feeling and perception into there for the time being.

So think about yourself as a body united with a consciousness that has things going through the mind.

that it's like a river. When you look at a river from a distance, it appears to be a stable, unchanging thing. But when you look closely, you see that it's actually a continuous flow of water. No drop of water remains the same from moment to moment, yet we still call it "the river."

The body is similar. The cells are constantly dying and being replaced. The breath is continuously coming

and going. The blood is flowing, the heart is beating, the neural activity is firing and changing. Nothing about the physical form remains static, even for an instant. Yet because the changes happen gradually and in patterns, we have the illusion of a solid, permanent body.

The same is true for consciousness. We tend to think of consciousness as this stable, continuous awareness that's been with us our whole lives. But when we examine it closely, we see that consciousness is actually arising and passing away moment by moment. It's different when we're asleep, different when we're awake, different when we're happy, different when we're sad. It's constantly shifting and changing based on what object it's cognizing.

And then there are all the mental formations - our thoughts, emotions, moods, perceptions. These are obviously coming and going. One moment we're thinking about dinner, the next moment we're remembering something from childhood, then we're planning tomorrow, then we're feeling frustrated about traffic. It's a constant parade of mental activity, none of it lasting.

When the Buddha pointed this out to those five practitioners, something clicked for them. They saw that what they had been taking to be a solid, permanent self was actually just a collection of processes - all of them impermanent, all of them constantly changing, none of them substantial enough to constitute a real, lasting self.

This doesn't mean we don't exist at all. Obviously something is here reading these words, something is breathing, something is aware. But what we are is much more like a dynamic process than a thing. We're more like a verb than a noun. We're a flowing, ever-changing pattern of physical and mental activities rather than a solid entity.

Understanding this can be tremendously liberating. So much of our suffering comes from trying to protect and defend this sense of solid self. We worry about what others think of us, we get attached to our opinions and preferences, we're afraid of losing what we have or not getting what we want. But when we see that this self we're trying to protect isn't actually there in the way we thought, much of that anxiety and grasping can begin to relax.

is to realize its connection to nature. We often think, "Oh, this is me, this is who I am." But did you have anything to do with how this body came out of the womb? Did you have anything to do with the basic color of your hair, color of your eyes, physique, whether your hair was curly or straight, whether it was blonde or brown?

And yet, we take so much pride or embarrassment about the way the body turns out, as if we had something to do with it. Of course, if we reflect, we realize it was just our father's sperm meeting our mother's egg, combining, multiplying in cells, nourishment from the womb, being born, growing from food and air, aging over years—getting bigger and stronger, and then getting weaker, less capable. We had nothing to do with the aging process. It just happened in this body, completely out of our control. We

make minor choices that affect its appearance, but it's basically out of our control. And that's because the body is really just part of physical nature.

One of our teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, put it this way: "This body came out of nature. It's part of nature. It's never departed from nature and it belongs to nature. So give it back to nature and that'll be a big relief for you."

You can think about emotions in the same way. This package that we all have of joy and delight and fear and apprehension and sadness—this is just mental nature. It's not ours because we all have it. It's just part of being human. So in the same way, we can't claim those. When they express, it's mental nature expressing itself.

Sometimes seeing this, we retreat and want to find our true identity in consciousness. "Oh, I'm not any of that changing stuff. I'm not really the changing emotions and changing thoughts and the changing body that's going to decay. I'm really the awareness that holds all of that. That's what I really am."

But when you start to think in this way, there's another piece that's missing from this identification with consciousness, which is that consciousness is in no way unique. There's nothing in consciousness that makes it particularly like me or like you. And there's nothing individual in it. Because of that, everybody's consciousness in that way of just knowing is pretty much the same part of nature. So there's nowhere to find a Sally or a Carol or an Annie in consciousness. There's nothing unique. So there's no individuality there. We realize consciousness is just another part of mental nature, not at all individual, something in fact that unites us all, that we share.

As you examine all these different components of the aggregates, you might ask: Where was I expecting to find a self in all that? Where was I expecting to find an "I" and what did I think it might look like? We have some thought that maybe it's discoverable, that it still feels like it should be there and yet it's completely elusive.

So the Buddha described how things should be seen, also in the discourse on not-self: "Therefore, all form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself." And in the same way with feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Why? He continued, "Seeing thus the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, with feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, one's mind is liberated. When it is liberated, one understands: birth is destroyed. The holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more renewal of being."

When we don't fixate on these individual arisings as "I" or "mine," then we can just let them come and go as they will. We don't feel that we need to hang on to them or claim them or identify with them. In that way, we see their unsatisfactory nature and the mind inclines to dispassion toward them, not being moved with greed and aversion. And it's dispassion that starts to release the mind from its grip.

Sometimes we might think that this pointing toward dispassion is a cold kind of turning, that we're going to become uncaring, unemotional, unfeeling by this kind of equanimity.

But it's not like that. It doesn't feel like that. When the burden of I starts to be lifted from our existence, there's a lot more lightness. And that sense of lightness and lack of burden starts to open the heart naturally to stronger feelings of love and compassion. So the quality of life warms up when this burden of self starts to lift.

Jack Kornfield was visiting an old monk in Sri Lanka—a very happy person. This old monk asked him, "Well, you're a Buddhist. What do you understand the main teaching to be?" And Jack said, "Well, I understand the main teaching to be that within this whole complex of changing phenomena of body and mind, there's no abiding self. There's no constant I."

And the monk just said, "That's right. No self, no problem." And he just sat on his bed and rocked with his big smile. No self, no problem.

I'll close with this quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj about this interplay between the two, who said: "Love tells me I'm everything. Wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Thank you for listening.

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