Five Aggregates: Self and Emptiness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:38

Andrea talked a couple of nights ago about the five aggregates, and I want to pick up that theme and explore it a little further. It can be, in our meditation, the basis for a lot of great insight. She explained very well the basic concepts and how to work with them in our practice. I just want to extend it a little bit more tonight to talk about opening this scheme for greater insight.

I'm going to talk about insights in two directions, both of which have to do with the quality of emptiness. In the Buddhist tradition, emptiness tends to get talked about in two ways. One, that our overall experience is empty of self. And the second, that the nature of sense experience is insubstantial. So I'm going to try to cover both of those tonight.

In talking about this sense of self or I, we start to realize that this question about I or self is really at the center of what the Buddha taught about. It was a unique contribution that he made to the whole meditative journey and really the history of philosophy. So a big encouragement is to examine this sense of I, because when we don't examine it, it gets us in a lot of suffering.

I would say one way of understanding the Buddha's teachings is that this unexamined sense of I is one of our biggest misunderstandings in life. The actual truth of things is a lot lighter than we imagine it to be. When we carry around this sense of self, we put an unnecessary burden on our experience of life. The experience of life as we see clearly becomes much easier, lighter, and more joyful. This is not an intellectual question so much as a way to free the heart and mind.

The sense of I tends to be at the center of our whole universe. You could say that our whole life revolves around it—our thoughts, our words, our actions, our values, our associations, our directions, our motives. It all comes out of this sense of I. And this sense of I seems like the most obvious fact in the world at first. It seems totally self-evident. Why should we have to question it?

But it's very curious. You've been examining your experience really carefully for two weeks. Have you located the I yet? Have you ever kind of looked inside and said, "Well, where is it? It's here all the time. It must be somewhere. I must be able to find it." Have you found that I? It's really curious, isn't it?

The Dalai Lama said that when we are sure something exists, but we can't find it when we turn to it, that's a sure sign of delusion. So that's basically where we start from with this question of I. There's a sense of delusion or confusion about it.

The classical analogy is to walking through the grass and believing that we see a snake. We become very startled and afraid. But when we look more closely, we see that it's not a snake at all. It's a piece of rope

with different colors—maybe white and green and red—but they're intertwined in such a way, with such a length, we thought it was a snake. When we see that it's a piece of rope, we're not afraid anymore.

In the same way, when we examine our experience with the sense of I, it's kind of scary and burdensome. But the Buddha said when we investigate it correctly and we can see things as they really are, that sense of fear and burden and dis-ease goes away for us. This is the motivation to understand this sense.

We can see some of the confusion by the language that we use around I. So let me ask you a simple question: How tall are you? This is not a trick question. I assume everybody knows the answer. This is a common question we hear every day. I would answer it and say, "I'm 5'10"." You might have your own measurement in feet and inches or in centimeters if you're from Europe.

But this is a very easy question for us to answer. Yet when we say, "I'm 5'10"," what we're really talking about is the body, right? The body's 5'10". It's not the thoughts that are 5'10". It's not my joy or anxiety that's 5'10". It's not my feeling tone that's 5'10". It's the body.

So here we're using "I" to mean the body. The "I" is completely identified with the body: "I am 5'10"." Oh, really?

Well, let me ask another question: What color are your eyes? That's easy too, right? This is not a trick either. So I'd say my eyes are brown. So here we're not the body, but we're someone separate from the body who owns eyes that are a part of the body. They're *my* eyes. So we've moved from being the body to being the one who owns the body. That's a little odd, isn't it?

So which are you? Are you the body or are you the owner? And can you really be both? Is that logically consistent? How many selves do you have?

We can do the same thing with the mind. Sometimes we'll say, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." So here we're identifying with an emotion, or let's say with the mind. I am the emotion of happiness or sadness. Other times we'll talk about my joys and my sorrows, my hopes and my fears. So now we're someone apart from the emotions who has them, who owns them. So are you the body or the owner of it? The emotions or the owner of them?

Or there's one other really familiar sense, which is that it feels like we're somewhere behind the eyes, like maybe in the center of the mass of brain, and we're kind of looking out. I am looking out on the world, and everything happens to me, who am the observer. I'm the center of it all, I experience it all, and that's what I really am. It's like there's a command and control center somewhere up here. We're that observer and director of everything.

These are five different ways that we think we're the "I," and there are more. The Buddha enumerated twenty, but that's another talk. So there are at least five and maybe more. They're all delusion. Every single one of them is delusion.

The Buddha put it this way, and he said this a few times—he didn't just say it once: "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." And one of my teachers put it even more crisply than this. He said, "Everything you think is wrong."

It reminds me of a great phrase that somebody heard on a talk radio show. It's an unusual source of wisdom, but a yogi told me he heard this on a talk radio show where the announcer was commenting on the mind. There are a lot of opinions that go back and forth in talk radio, so maybe this is the right place for a comment like this. The commentator said, "The mind: often wrong, seldom in doubt." It's kind of like that, isn't it? We hold lots of opinions and beliefs and we seldom really question them. It feels like they should be true.

The Buddha said that the "I" is basically a fiction. Until we examine it clearly, we won't be able to see through it. When we are bound by it, then it creates a lot of unnecessary suffering in our lives.

So this concept of "I" has kind of entranced us. The whole world, the whole human world is roped in by it. And then it sings—we listen to that tune, we're kind of caught in that tune, and that tune has three main chords: greed, aversion, delusion. These are all the activities of the "I."

So undoing this misunderstanding is the central work of insight meditation. Spring talked last night about the truth of impermanence and how many ways that affects our lives, on how many levels we can see that truth.

This teaching on impermanence is closely tied to the teaching on self. The more we see clearly the truth of impermanence on all its levels, the more we understand how this self does or doesn't exist.

One way to approach this is to look around the room. Most likely we see people. I'm suggesting that as you look around, you notice persons—there's a person over there, there's a person over there, there's a person in the back. Most likely we see persons.

But in the Visuddhimagga, an ancient commentary, the author says that if you look and see a person, you're not seeing very clearly. Put another way, one who sees a person hasn't investigated deeply enough.

The commentary offers the analogy of a butcher. If you're a skilled butcher who's been working for twenty years and you have the carcass of a cow on your table, as you're chopping it up, you don't say "cow, cow, cow." A skilled butcher wouldn't do that. A skilled butcher knows more intimate detail—rump, tenderloin, sirloin, ribs.

So one who wants to investigate one's own body and mind needs to see more clearly than this tag "person." We need to examine that assumption.

We might ask, well, how did the Buddha see? I think the Buddha saw in two different ways when he looked at a person.

Sometimes he saw the six sense bases—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. We've talked about this framework extensively. It provides the structure our meditation instructions are based around, so it's very comfortable for us. It's becoming more and more familiar, and this is a good way of understanding what constitutes human experience, what makes up a person. Most often, the Buddha used this format of the six sense bases to cut through craving, because we attach to things based on their pleasant nature at a sense door. So if you want to cut through craving, look at the six sense bases. This is very skillful.

But the other scheme he used—and I'd say he used it just as often—was the scheme that Andrea presented the other night: the five aggregates. Understanding our experience in terms of material form, feeling tone, perception, formations, and consciousness. He used this scheme for a different purpose. He used this scheme to cut through wrong view—that is, delusion about the way we're made up.

This goes to the heart of the two ways that we're bound. Craving is the affective manifestation of our bondage—this constant lure of attractive sense objects. It's how we get pulled off center again and again, either through desire or through aversion. The not seeing clearly is the delusion part. So that's one thing we have to understand enough to not continue to get caught in.

But the other basic component of our suffering is ignorance. The Buddha said something like: "Fettered by craving and obscured by ignorance, beings have been wandering this samsara since beginningless time." These are the twin poles of our problem—craving on the one hand, which is affective, and ignorance on the other, which is delusional and has to do with wisdom.

So to cut through craving, we use the sense bases. To cut through ignorance and delusion about our experience, we use the schema of the five aggregates. The Buddha used it again and again to point to right understanding.

One meta comment about the five aggregates. I looked at this list for years and thought, this is a very funny list. How did anybody come up with this kind of strange list? Body is important—the physical world, that's important. Consciousness is important. What are we without consciousness? Mental formations are basically mental states—those are important. But what are feeling and perception doing in there? These two little blips, what are they doing in there?

I could never figure it out. And then why, if feeling and perception are in there, aren't some other things that are just as important? Volition, contact, and attention—why aren't those in there?

Why is it five and not eight? I don't know. Somebody suggested that this list existed before the Buddha, so perhaps he was simply working with an established framework. He could have expanded it to eight aggregates, or in my view, he could have simplified it to just three: form, formations, and consciousness, incorporating feeling and perception within formations. I could never quite understand the reasoning, and I still don't know the definitive answer. But I came to realize it doesn't actually matter.

It truly doesn't matter whether we work with three, five, or eight categories. The crucial question is: can everything in your experience be placed within one of these categories? This is what matters. Does this framework provide a complete outline of human experience?

We'll continue with the traditional five aggregates. Is there anything in your experience that cannot fit into form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness? Is there anything else happening beyond these categories? You can continue exploring this question. It's not essential that you simply accept my word or the Buddha's teaching. What matters is that you discover what rings true in your own experience. So keep investigating.

For now, let's proceed on the understanding that these five categories encompass our entire experience. This assumption is significant because it suggests this is an exhaustive list—it covers everything we experience.

So what's notably absent from this list? There's something quite important that we've been discussing that doesn't appear here. Someone might say emptiness. Emptiness isn't explicitly listed, though it could be understood as an insight, perhaps fitting within mental formations.

Nibbana—that's true. The list doesn't include Nirvana. In the Abhidhamma, they specifically addressed this as an additional category. This framework doesn't include the unconditioned, and there's good reason for this omission. Most of us don't realize nibbana moment after moment. When the realization of nibbana does arise, it exists outside the reach of the five aggregates. But that's advanced territory—graduate level, if you will. For now, we're working with what falls within our sensory experience, since nibbana lies beyond the reach of the senses.

The most significant absence I've mentioned tonight is the "I"—capital I. It's not included in this list. We don't have form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness, *and* self. This omission carries profound implications.

The understanding here is that there exists *only* form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. There's no need for an I. Our entire human experience consists of these five aggregates, and the I is not among them. You could express this same truth through the framework of the six sense bases: our complete human experience consists of six types of sense objects and the consciousness that knows them. That's all there is—sense objects and the knowing of them, the five aggregates including consciousness. Nothing else exists. There's no self lurking anywhere.

This provides a complete and exhaustive description of experience. When we begin to see in this way, this understanding brings greater freedom into our lives. But untangling this sense of I is not easy work.

It's so integral to our concepts. It's not easy to untangle.

Let's take a simple example. In the traditional description, it was said: if you look at a chariot, what is a

chariot? What is this thing we call chariot? Is it the wheels? Is it the cart? Is it the axle? Is it the steering post? Is it the reins? Is it the yoke for the horses? Or is the chariot just an assemblage of all those little pieces? It's not a specific thing in itself, but rather just the way the pieces are put together.

Here's a simple example. Can everybody see what this is and recognize this? It's a pen, right? It's a ballpoint pen. Clearly it's an object we all know and are familiar with. It's a pen.

But what happens if I start to take it apart? Then we see there are about five or maybe six different pieces to it—the cap and the tip and the end and the barrel and the ink cartridge. So where's the pen now? Is there a pen now? Or are there only these five parts, which might be compared to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness? They're separate parts. Sometimes they don't have anything to do with each other. Is your liver very much like your compassion? They're really different, aren't they?

But when they're assembled in a certain way, all these different disparate pieces form something useful. They form a kind of unity, a kind of unit, that is very helpful. It's called a pen, or conventionally we call it a human being. But it's just an assemblage of really different kinds of parts.

Yet it's very useful to know. If you need to write a note to Elizabeth, it's very helpful to know where the pen is. And when you go out of the hall tonight, it's very useful to know that your room is not someplace where somebody else thinks is their room, or you'll end up on their floor.

So this concept of objects or beings is really useful, but let's not be deceived that there's anything essential there—anything more than an assembly of parts fit together in a certain way and functioning as a kind of unit.

There is not within us some essential entity that is the self, that is the I. When I came into meditation, I sort of assumed that there was somewhere like a mini-me inside that was kind of running things and experiencing things, and I kept looking for it. William James undertook the same investigation, the philosopher, and he said, "I search for this sense of self, but the closest I can find is a tickle in the back of my throat."

But we need to carry out this search. If we don't carry it out, we'll always be left with this suspicion that it is somewhere—we just haven't found it yet. That's why it's so helpful to look very clearly at all these sense experiences of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mind objects and the knowing of them, to realize that's all there is. Or the five aggregates—that's all there is: form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. There's nothing else.

One reason this is important is because all these component parts, these five aggregates or the sense bases, are all impermanent. When Spring talked last night, I imagine she talked about how impermanence goes all through our experience. It goes down to this very fine level of detail. As closely as you can see through the aggregates, through the sense bases, all of these things are impermanent. That means they all arise, persist for a while, and pass away. There's nothing ongoing.

One of the assumptions about self is that it's continuing, right? If we didn't have that assumption about self, we wouldn't really be afraid of dying, because we would think, "Oh, that's somebody else that's gonna die." But it's because we think, "I'm going to die," that it causes that kind of anxiety or dread. So we have this assumption of continuity with the self, and that's where some of the problem comes from.

So it's very helpful to understand that impermanence applies to these component parts. It doesn't apply to nibbana. And actually, when Brent said emptiness, he may have been pointing to nirvana. So I may have—is that right? My apologies. So Brent was also pointing to nirvana when he said emptiness. Christine said nirvana. That is the element that's not included in the five aggregates. That's not subject to arising and passing. But all these components are.

So the Buddha had a lot of dialogues where he explored this. Here's one place where it came in. After his awakening, he decided to find this group of five friends that he'd been practicing with before his enlightenment. And he saw that they were near the town of Sarnath. And so he traveled there from Bodh Gaya and met them there and offered to give them teachings.

At first, they weren't interested because he looked too healthy. "Oh, he's gotten lax, he's given up the ascetic practices, he's fallen off the path." But as he approached them, they tuned in that there was something going on with their old friend, Gautama. So they decided tentatively, "Okay, we'll give an ear."

And he gave them a discourse on the Four Noble Truths. During that discourse, one of the five, Kandanya, had beginning enlightenment insight and saw the truth of the Dhamma. The other four didn't get it. The Buddha wanted them all to get it, so he had them practice meditation, develop some concentration. A little later, he gave them another talk. In this talk, all five of them came to awakening. This talk was on the characteristic of not-self.

And the gist of it was using the theme of the five aggregates to explore impermanence and not-self. So he asked them these questions: "Is form permanent or impermanent?" That means the body and physical senses. Is it permanent or impermanent? They're all impermanent, right? So they replied, "Impermanent, venerable sir."

He said, "Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or happy?" This is a great question, right? I'm sure Spring touched on this too. Whatever is impermanent, even if it's delightful, will pass away. And if we're basing our happiness on it, we lose that happiness. So is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or happy? They said, "Unsatisfactory."

So then he asked them, "Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: This is mine. This I am. This is myself?" And they said, "No, venerable sir." And in the course of that dialogue and that investigation, they all became fully enlightened, all five of them.

This is a powerful inquiry. It's better to get it from the Buddha than from me. It can be a powerful investigation. Is it fit to be regarded thus? This is mine. Like if I hang on to this pen because I really like

this pen, is that fitting? Well no, it's going to run out of ink or the barrel's going to crack or the tip's going to break off and then I'm going to be disappointed.

Or "this I am." Can I take this body to be what I truly am knowing that one day it's going to die? Or "this is myself." Our personality, let's say, we identify with as ourself, but it's so changeable. It's so variable. It never stays the same for very long at a time. And so if we identify with that in ourself, we're always insecure.

We're riding a wave that doesn't have any solidity.

The Buddha conducted this same dialogue with Anuradha regarding feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. None of them fit to be regarded as "this is mine, this I am, this is myself." You could do the same inquiry with the six sense bases—either approach would lead to the same understanding.

So where is this "I"? What constitutes this "I"?

A monk once approached the Buddha and said, "Venerable sir, wanderers from other sects—all deluded, as the other sects in the Buddha's time hadn't developed this kind of wisdom—are approaching me with philosophical questions. They ask whether the Tathagata exists after death or not. I don't know how to answer them. How should I respond?"

The Buddha led this monk, whose name was Anuradha, into another dialogue, another inquiry. He asked, "Do you think the Tathagata is this body?" This seems rather preposterous—that the most enlightened being would simply be the body. Anuradha, being wiser than that, answered no.

"Do you think the Tathagata is this feeling tone, the vedana quality?" No.

"Do you think the Buddha is his perception?" No.

"Do you think the Buddha is just a collection of mental formations?" No.

"Do you think the Buddha is just this consciousness?" No.

"And Anuradha, do you think the Buddha exists apart from all the aggregates? Do you think the Buddha is somewhere else?" No.

The Buddha then said, "Well, Anuradha, you can't even find the Tathagata here and now. How much sense can it make to talk about where he's going to be after he dies? This is how you should answer the wanderers from the other sects to dispel their confusion."

Sometimes we think perhaps the self is all these things taken together—I'm my liver and my blood and my pleasant and unpleasant experiences and my perceptions and my thoughts and feelings and consciousness. That's all me. This is the conventional idea of a human being, much like the pen—an assemblage of parts, quite different and distinct, functioning together as a kind of unit. That's what we

take to be a person.

But the problem is that all these things are coming and going continuously. If you truly feel that all these things constitute you, then you must be coming and going moment by moment by moment. If you can feel this—that your self is arising and passing and arising and passing on all these different levels moment by moment—and you want to call that "I," fine. But there's nothing continuing there when you see with proper wisdom.

The other problem with this view is that it raises the question: how many selves do I have? Can the liver be your self and your compassion be your self? They're not the same thing. So how many selves are there? Is there a liver self and a compassion self? It becomes quite problematic.

This concept of all these things being our self doesn't really work either. We find that the self is an unnecessary appendage to the aggregates. We don't need to add it. All we need to see is form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. The self isn't needed.

This became really clear in an interaction the Buddha had with another wanderer named Bahiya. You may have heard this story, as it's quite famous. Bahiya was meditating somewhere near the coast and thought that he was perhaps an arahant.

He had never met the Buddha or heard his teachings, but he had the feeling, "I'm a pretty spiritual guy. Maybe I'm at the end. Maybe I've completed the journey and maybe I'm an arhat." But then he heard that there was someone who really was an arhat, the Tathagata, Gautama Buddha. And he said, "Well, let me just go and check myself out. If this person is genuine, he can tell me if I'm an arhat or not."

So he found the Buddha. He had a great deal of urgency because he actually had a lot of great qualities, a lot of good spiritual qualities. The Buddha was on alms round, and Bahia came up to him and said, "Venerable sir, I've come a long way. I have a great deal of passion about this question. Can you please give me your teaching in brief?"

And the Buddha said, "This is not the appropriate time. I'm collecting my meal for the day. Please wait until it's over."

But Bahia said, "It is hard to know how long you will live or I will live. Please, can you give me your teaching now?"

And a second time, the Buddha refused. He said, "I'm on my alms round. Please come see me later."

But as these stories usually go, if you ask the third time, the Buddha can't say no. So Bahia again asked and said, "It's hard to know how long you will live or I will live."

So the Buddha gave him this very brief teaching. First, he told him he wasn't an arhat. Oh, sad day. But he told him how to understand so that he could become awakened. And he said, "Bahia, this is how you

should train. In what is seen, let there be just the seen. In what is heard, let there be just the heard. In what is sensed, let there be just what is sensed. In the thought, let there be just what is thought. Then there will be no you in terms of that."

You get that in his formulation? In the seen, let there be just the seen. That means there's no one standing aside who's thinking they're doing the seeing. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In that way, there will be no you in terms of that. You won't create an "I" that believes "I'm doing the seeing." There's just what is seen.

"When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, then you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

This is a pith meditation instruction. You can explore this in your experience. When you are experiencing any sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, is it just standing on its own? Is there just the seen, the heard, the sensed, the cognized? Or are you adding an "I" that owns it or experiences it or is it? See what that's like. There's just the seen, there's just the heard, there's just the sensed. That's the end of suffering.

Bahia's mind was so balanced and so interested that at these words he awakened, completed his journey, got what he had come for. That afternoon, walking through a field, he was attacked by a bull, gored, and died. Who knows how long you will live or I will live? Bahia died that afternoon, but he had understood. And so he had come to the end of suffering.

So this is the possibility in our practice—to explore this quality when self is absent, and then to see what brings it about. I want to go into a little more detail about this in another talk, but there are specific things that give rise to the sense of self.

This is the Venerable Ananda, who was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life. A beautiful, kind, compassionate, thoughtful person.

After the Buddha, Ananda is one of the people you really would have liked to know from the Pali Canon. He had a great heart. And so he was describing to the monks that after he had ordained, when he was not understanding very well, there was another monk who gave him this very clear instruction of how to understand.

This other monk told him, "Ananda, it is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging. And by clinging to what does 'I am' arise? By clinging to form, to feeling, to perception, to formations and to consciousness." So when there is clinging or grasping, the sense of 'I' follows on from that. And once there is clinging or grasping, we're on the way to suffering because eventually change will take it away from us. And when we're holding on and there's change, we suffer.

One meditator, I thought very nicely, defined suffering as rope burn—holding on to what's passing through our hands, it burns.

The Buddha put it this way: "When there is form, by clinging to form, by adhering to form, one regards things thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is myself.'" And similarly for the other aggregates. So the 'I' is built on clinging, and clinging leads to suffering. We can feel this again and again. So when we let go...

It's not that in the absence of self there's this cold world that opens up. I mean, this description sounds kind of technical—lack of clinging, aggregates, all of that. This is really about freeing the heart. So when the sense of 'I' is lifted, there's a lot more ease. And from that ease, more loving-kindness and compassion and joy and contentment naturally come through.

A lot of you know this story, but for those who haven't heard it, it's a great pointing. Jack Kornfield was in Sri Lanka and visited an old Sri Lankan monk. The monk invited him into his bedroom and had heard that Jack was doing some teaching. It was in the early years of his teaching in the West, and so he wanted to check him out. He said, "Well, I understand that you've studied Buddhism and you're doing some teaching. What's the essence of the Buddhist teachings?"

And Jack said, "Well, the essence of the teachings is that within this changing flow of experience, there's no abiding entity that we could call an ongoing self or 'I.' There's really no self here."

And the old monk smiled and he said, "No self, no problem." And he just laughed. "No self, no problem."

So that's the pointing. That kind of seeing opens the heart.

So one way we can investigate is this lack of self in the experience of the five aggregates. Another way that we can investigate is the emptiness of what constitutes our sense experience, the lack of substance in what constitutes the experience of the senses.

So let me read to you the start of a sutta. This is from the Samyutta Nikaya, and the sutta is called "A Lump of Foam."

"The Blessed One was dwelling at Ayoja on the bank of the river Ganges. There he addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is—internal or external, gross or subtle—a practitioner inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance could there be in form?'"

So the Buddha's talking about our bodies and the whole physical world. And he's saying that our body and the physical world is void, hollow, and insubstantial, just like a lump of foam. That's a fairly radical statement.

So this is the investigation that's suggested by this sutta: How can form, how can this body, this world, be like a mass of foam?

I was teaching at Spirit Rock a few years ago and giving a dharma talk at the same time of day—at 7:30. It was getting dark outside. In the middle of the dharma talk, we heard this kind of harrowing cry. It was like a baby crying or someone crying in real pain and anguish. We all noticed it, commented on it, but let the dharma talk finish. I think a manager went out to take a look.

When the talk ended, I went out and a number of people went out to see what that had been about. By one of the residence halls near the meditation hall, there was a deer lying there with its neck broken—a young deer with its neck twisted back at an untenable angle. One person reported that they'd seen a couple of large dogs running off. So what we think happened is that two dogs attacked this deer and somehow broke the deer's neck and killed it. But when people showed up, the dogs ran away. By the time we got there, the deer was dead.

We formed a circle around it and said loving-kindness meditation and sent good wishes for it. Then, after spending some time with the deer, we went on our way. The caretakers said they called the Humane Society, who promised to come by the next day and pick up the body of the deer. So the caretakers took it and left it down by a parking lot so that people could easily load it into the van. We continued to say prayers and send loving-kindness for the deer.

But the Humane Society never came. Day by day, we would go by and look at the body of the deer. Every day there would be a little bit less of it left because coyotes and raccoons and turkey vultures and ants were making it their food. Little by little there was less and less of the deer until eventually there was just some fur and some bones. After about a week, that was all that was left.

Where was all that body? Where was that flesh and blood and sinews and organs? Just gone, like a mass of foam. Just gone, as one day all of us will be just gone. So in this way, we can see that our body is like a mass of foam.

But there are other ways too. When you're meditating and you're very present—you've been here for two weeks now—and you're really looking closely at a sensation in your body, this is as close as we can know the nature of this body. Our awareness is right there touching the sensation. What do you find when you're really present, really awake and touching a sensation? Is it solid, firm, unchanging? Can you rest your life upon it? Or is it more characterized by pulsing, vibrating, up and down, intense and weaker, always changing, flowing, vibrating, with just waves of energy?

When we get right into the sensations in the body—which is really as close as we can get, closer than a microscope—we just find change, fluctuation, pulsing, vibration, really insubstantial.

When you listen to a sound, is it solid? Or does the sound have a nature of just arising and passing away? A car passes by, a bird calls, someone coughs in the meditation hall. The bell rings, comes together, glides away, back into the silence. Smells and tastes are even more floaty than body and sounds. Emotions—have you ever tried to hang on to just a bare emotion? They go so fast. If you can find it in the body, it may be

easier to stay in contact, but the body, as we know, is dissolving too.

All the senses, when we look closely from this quiet meditative mind, reveal this dissolving nature, this transient nature. One of the hardest to penetrate is the sense of sight, so let's do some reflection on seeing, because it looks solid. This world looks really solid, and that's one place where we believe in the solidity of the world. So let's question this a little bit.

We know from seventh grade science how sight works. Light particles travel from somewhere, bounce off objects like the wall, floor, ceiling, people, and then come to our eye. These light particles strike the retina and then travel up the optic nerve to the brain, where some kind of processing goes on. Then mysteriously—and nobody knows how this happens—that gives rise to the consciousness of seeing. There's this huge leap that scientists haven't even begun to find an answer to, because it's transitioning from the world of matter to the world of consciousness. But this leap happens—we know it does, because we experience sight.

So the sight forms—that wall looks really solid and unchanging. But if we think about how it arises, we start to realize it's only appearing because all these photons are striking the retina many times a second, generating a nerve impulse that the brain translates and concocts into some appearance of wall. That's all that's happening.

So this appearance of wall is a fabrication based on what's actually there, which I don't know what it is. The way the light hits our eye and then the nervous system and the brain work together to concoct that image, that sight.

So we kind of think we're living in a real solid world. We think we're living in a real world that's made up of walls and floors and people. But actually what we're living in is an appearance of a world that's constructed by our senses. And that construction is not solid because it's turning on and off many times a second. It's being generated by these nerve signals in the brain and it appears to us as consciousness. It's some kind of representation of what's there. We're not questioning that. But it's not the same as what's really there. It's a fabrication. It's a human fabrication. A dog would see it differently. A cat would see it differently. A mosquito would see it differently. So it's kind of our creation. So it's an insubstantial appearance, not a solid world.

One of the things I used to like to play with: This book is blue, right? But where is the blue that this book is? It's not really here, is it? Because what's really happening is white light falls on this and the blue color gets reflected back to you and to me and all the other colors get absorbed. So what's coming to you is blue light and that means what's not in the book. Every other color is in the book. So the book is everything but blue. But it looks like blue. So where is this blue? It's not in the book. It's in your consciousness and nowhere else. So this world we inhabit is a world that's created by our senses and what's out there. So in that way, even the world of sight, which seems solid, is insubstantial.

So the Buddha continued in this way: "Suppose, monks, that a magician should build a magic show at a crossroads, and a keen-sighted person should inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it. It would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance, monks, could there be in a magic show?"

And then he says, this play of consciousness is the magic show. If we understand it, it's kind of delightful. It's kind of amazing that this happens. The Tibetans call this a magical display. And not to lose sight of the kind of entrancing quality of magic. But if we don't understand it, we get deceived into thinking that it's more substantial and more solid and, in a way, more real than it is.

Do you remember that book, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Milan Kundera? There is something a little bit unbearable about how light reality actually is. And so with our concepts, we invest it with more security and more solidity and more stability than it actually has. And part of the work of meditation is to untangle that apparent solidity and see the insubstantial nature.

This can feel a little unsettling at first. It kind of feels like the ground has gone out a little bit. But it's actually not dangerous. It's freeing to see it, but we need to be patient with ourselves as we understand this, because it can feel a little unsettling.

So the Buddha continued, "Whatever form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness a person inspects, it will appear to them to be void, hollow, and insubstantial. What substance could there be in form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness?"

And he concludes with this image which is very lovely and runs through a lot of later Buddhist literature. Form is like a lump of foam and feeling just an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and formations are like a banana tree. What? I didn't get that one for a long time, but when I lived in the tropics, I came to know banana trees don't have a solid trunk. They're basically hollow in the trunk. So when one banana tree grows up and gives rise to bananas, the trunk dies. It just crumples.

And a new trunk needs to grow for another batch of bananas. Formations are like a banana tree. Consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun—another name for the Buddha.

This insubstantial nature of reality is something we can discover directly through our meditation practice. We begin to understand how one of my teachers could say, "Everything that appears has no solid existence whatsoever. It's just a play in consciousness. Everything is held in consciousness." This is the meaning of the emptiness of phenomena or the emptiness of sense experiences. They're not solid. They're not substantial in that way.

This also is not meant to be a cold experience. Sometimes we think emptiness is just a dark black space that doesn't have any heart, that we have to surrender our humanity to, but it's not like that. When we see this, we're all in this same situation. We're all living in this insubstantial world through our bodies and through all our senses. We're all in this same boat.

Here's a quotation from a student of ours who was exploring this in a class for senior students a few years ago. She wrote: "It's spooky. I would look at everything—like this Japanese lamp that I love—and I'd see that it's just an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all appearances. When I went from an object and say it's an appearance to a person and say they're an appearance, it made my hair stand on end. But it's true, and it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see that she's changing all the time. When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're all so fragile."

You may know this figure of Kuan Yin, who in Mahayana literature is the embodiment of compassion. She's a female figure, a deity figure that embodies the quality of compassion. It's said that Kuan Yin listens to the whole world and hears the cries from our hearts—the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows of our human lives. She's there to hear them all and be receptive to them all and to care for us all.

But Kuan Yin is not a beginning meditator. She knows that this is okay. She knows that because of the insubstantiality, our suffering is also not substantial. And that when we see the insubstantiality clearly enough, it releases our suffering also. As it says in the Heart Sutra: "When the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara perceived that all five aggregates are empty, he was saved from all suffering and distress."

So it's seeing the emptiness that liberates, and Kuan Yin knows this. That's why she, like the Buddha, has a half smile. She sees the sublime beauty of the magical display, and she also feels the poignancy of the transience of it, both at the same time. So she can't land in sorrow, and she can't land in joy, but she holds them both.

This is the word of wisdom that is attributed to Kuan Yin: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm? The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

So let's just sit together for a moment, please.

From the haiku poet Issa after his four-year-old daughter died:

"This dewdrop world is just a dewdrop world,
and yet, and yet..."

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