The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:50

The title of the talk tonight is The Five Aggregates Are Not Self.

It seems in the West today that the concern for the self has risen to a greater level than I've ever seen in my lifetime. I want to say that I accept present company from this general observation. I don't really mean you all when I point to this phenomenon because this practice doesn't lead to immediate selfish gratification. You may have noticed that. This practice tends to frustrate self-centered desire on a regular basis. So you wouldn't be here if you were looking for a quick hit or a promotion of the self.

In fact, I feel most of the meditators I talk to have a very strong altruistic motivation in their practice. For most of you, I think there's a recognition this practice is not just about yourself, but it's bringing clarity and warmth into our own being so that we can take that out into the world and affect many people's lives for the better. So I think we are a fortunate group together for these six weeks or three months, quite a special group of people.

But in the world in general, things seem to be going in a little different direction. One of the reasons for this, I think, is that the role of families and the role of communities is getting weaker in Western culture by and large today. What that does is it leaves individuals more alone and isolated in a way that we didn't used to be. It seems like when people can't locate themselves in a larger context, either of family or of community, then the emphasis on the self correspondingly gets bigger and more important. Without family and without community, the opportunities for service become much more limited and the need for morality even becomes less obvious. We don't see the ramifications of our actions so easily.

The internet has helped to promote some of this weakening, I think, of our culture. I'm thinking of websites like the one that tries to connect people who are looking to be adulterers that had something like 37 million registered users when it was hacked this summer. That's a very high proportion of the people in North America who were looking to have an extramarital affair. It's kind of shocking.

The internet also offers a lot of opportunity for self-aggrandizement. So many people want to just increase the number of viewers on their YouTube channel or the number of followers on their Twitter feed. Fame becomes an end in itself. People no longer want to be famous for doing something. They just want to be famous for being famous. I don't remember this happening when I was young, but it's happening a lot today.

For example, in 1976, there was a survey that asked people to list their life goals. Fame came in at number 15 out of 16 possible goals. Thirty years later in 2007, a survey was taken about people's principle

ambitions. 51% of the people said that fame was one of their principle ambitions. Being famous was something they wanted.

So the self is a big deal. Its wants and needs and hopes and plans can become paramount, can seem to mean everything. Even for us at our level of understanding and given altruistic motivation, still our decisions, our thoughts, our choices in life revolve mostly around me, myself, and I. The "I" is the center for most of us as human beings.

But what's interesting is, have you ever found it clearly? Have you ever found this thing called "I" in your life or in your meditation? William James, the philosopher and writer, had a nice comment on it. He said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." That's about as big as it gets.

In Dharma practice, we have the opportunity really to look into this question of the self and its concerns in some depth. In fact, we really are encouraged to do this because the overemphasis on self can bring so much confusion and suffering. Correspondingly, if we can see it more clearly, there's a huge opportunity for freedom in relation to it.

We might say a central question in meditation is exploring what do we mean by a self? What is the nature of the "I"? Is there in fact a self? What is the real understanding of it? What are the implications if we believe there's a self? And how does it feel when that is not our central belief?

I like this statement by Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a great teacher in India who died I think in the 1990s. He said, "All yogas have only one aim, to save you from the calamity of separate existence." This is the aim of our practice also, to save us all from the calamity of separate existence.

This inquiry into self is not primarily an intellectual exercise. It's not about thinking ourselves through the question of self or "I." We introduce concepts, of course, so that those start to go in and hopefully loosen some of the solidity that we normally attribute to "I" or self. But the main form of insight has to come from our direct experience.

It doesn't come from thinking about this stuff.

So in the talk this evening, I really just want to plant some seeds. Over time, as these seeds settle, the hope is that they will flourish into insight under the conditions of some stillness and mindfulness. It's really the combination of the initial turning to investigation, as Andrea talked about last night, but to meet that from a place of some steadiness of mind and some interest in investigation.

So because of that, I don't want you to strain your brains too much tonight in trying to figure this stuff out. It's not really helpful. And when you go away, I don't want you to stay up all night either trying to figure it out. Please leave, do your walking, do your sitting, go to bed, have a good night's sleep. And let the words that make sense to you go in, resonate, and gestate. They can take seed and sprout later.

So let's start with what's kind of obvious. We are all individual beings and the discussion or pointing to

not-self doesn't change that. It doesn't try to argue against our individuality. We each had a certain course in life. We have a journey from birth to death. Our bodies are clearly separate. Our mind streams are unique. So we're not trying to merge ourselves into some cosmic oneness. The individuality is true and there are laws that govern our individuality. Laws of genetics and psychology and karma that are all based on this understanding of individuality—an existence of some form that is accurate.

But we could say that this is kind of the ordinary understanding of what beings are. And in that way, it's a conventional form of truth. But there is truth in the conventional understanding. So we're not trying to deny that altogether, but we want to understand it more subtly and in a more nuanced way, because there's more to it than the conventional understanding.

So Suzuki Roshi has this nice comment. He was talking about this question. He said, "Of course, the bird that we see and hear exists. It exists, but what you mean by that may not exactly be what I mean by that." So this is what we want to understand. In what way do we exist? In what way do we not exist as conventionally understood? Because there's something true and there's something that's not true in the conventional understanding.

We can start to question this sense of self by looking into some of the logic in the way we use words. So we take a look at the way we use "I," and I'm not sure that it really hangs together all that well. Let me give you an example.

If I ask, "How old are you?" the answer is pretty simple, right? Not a trick question. You might say I'm 35 or I'm 64 or whatever it is—comes easily. We all understand what that means. But all that really means is the body is 35 or 64, right? The thought you're having right now, is that 35 years old? The mood you're feeling right now, is that 64 years old? No, we mean the body came out of the womb 35, 64 years ago. So here, when we're using the word "I," we mean the same as the body. "I'm 35" means the body is 35, so I equals body.

But if I ask you, "What color are your eyes?" and you'd say they're blue or brown or hazel. Then you say, "My eyes are brown." But now we're not pointing to me as the body, but now they're my eyes. It's my body. So I am now the owner of the body. So that implies something separate from the body that owns it. And this is kind of a usual feeling, isn't it? That this is my body, that I possess it.

So which is it? Are you the body? Or are you something separate that possesses the body?

Looking more closely at this analysis, we might ask ourselves: can you really be both? Are these seemingly contradictory experiences of selfhood all somehow simultaneously true?

We can explore this same paradox with emotions. When I ask how you're feeling, you might respond, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." Here there's a complete identification of the "I" with the emotional state—happiness or sadness becomes who you are in that moment.

But we also speak naturally of "my joys and my sorrows," "my feelings." Suddenly the "I" appears as someone standing apart from these emotions, possessing them as objects. So which is accurate? Are you the emotion itself, or are you the one who owns and experiences it? Can both perspectives be true simultaneously?

There's another sense of self that I find quite common—perhaps you recognize it in your own experience. It's the feeling that there's a being residing somewhere in the middle of the head, located perhaps a couple of inches back from the eyes and between the ears, perched on a little throne and gazing out at the world. This inner observer experiences everything that arrives through the sense doors, somehow central to all experience yet maintaining a certain independence from it.

If you've seen Woody Allen's film "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex," you might remember Tony Randall's character—he played precisely this being, the command and control center in the brain directing all the body's activities. This captures something many of us feel: that we're the observer at the center of experience, stable and separate from the constantly changing phenomena flowing through awareness.

So here we have five different ways we might understand or experience this word "I"—and I'm not convinced they can all be true simultaneously. There seem to be some fundamental contradictions between these various self-concepts.

The Buddha expressed this perplexity beautifully: "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." One of my teachers put it even more directly—he said simply, "Everything you think is wrong."

I invite us to hold that as a genuine possibility: perhaps everything we think about the self is fundamentally mistaken. This reminds me of something I heard recently on a talk show, where someone remarked, "Ah yes, the mind—often wrong, seldom in doubt." This observation feels particularly relevant as we investigate the nature of selfhood. We rarely perceive our own inaccuracy, which is precisely what teachers mean when they speak of delusion.

Given this predicament, it might prove illuminating to consider how the Buddha actually saw human beings. As someone of remarkable clarity and insight, his perspective could offer us a different lens through which to examine our experience.

There's a fascinating passage in the Visuddhimagga, a sixth-century text from Sri Lanka that compiled the meditation techniques and insights available at that time—already nearly a thousand years after the Buddha's life, when considerable wisdom had accumulated. Written by the monk Buddhaghosa, a renowned commentator who synthesized the available teachings, this text offers a striking analogy.

The Visuddhimagga suggests that investigating what a person really is resembles the work of a skilled butcher who has expertly carved many carcasses. Such a craftsman, when preparing beef for sale, doesn't

continue thinking "cow, cow, cow" as he works. Instead, his trained perception recognizes the distinct cuts—rump, sirloin, tenderloin, ribs.

Similarly, the text explains, someone skilled in understanding mind and body doesn't examine experience while thinking "person, person, person." Rather, clear seeing reveals the various components that constitute what we call a human being.

The Buddha typically described these components through two complementary models covering the same territory but approaching it from different angles. Let me share one of his fundamental analyses.

"Bhikkhus," he said, "what is the totality of life?" What a profound question to pose! "Listen carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life. 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 mental objects. Anyone who claimed to describe anything beyond this as the totality of life would not be speaking of something they actually knew."

These are, as you'll recognize, the six senses—the five physical sense organs along with their objects, plus the mind as the sixth sense.

I find this description remarkable. First, notice its boldness—who else would dare to define the totality of life so definitively?

I don't think Einstein tried that. I don't think Marx tried that. I don't think Freud tried that. But 2,600 years ago, the Buddha did it. And can you argue with it? It includes everything, doesn't it? It includes it all.

This is a map that applies really well to our meditation because what we're often doing in the meditation instructions—and as you carry them out—is looking at our direct sense experience. Sight, sound, sensations in the body, smells and tastes when those are happening. Thoughts and emotions are the principal mind objects that we include. So this is a really good list for meditation instructions. We rely on it a lot. It's very helpful.

The Buddha used this map primarily to cut through craving. He would point out how we get attached to pleasant experiences at the six sense doors, and then how to see that attachment and how to cut it.

But there's another map that he used, I would say just about as often in the discourses, and this map is called the Five Aggregates. It covers the same terrain in that it also includes everything that's in our direct experience, but it divides it up differently. We'll go into that in a little bit of detail.

But the interesting thing to me is that the way he used the five aggregates was mainly to cut through a misunderstanding of what constitutes the self. So you could say he used the six senses largely to cut through craving. He used the five aggregates to cut through wrong view.

So this is the map that we want to explore tonight. Learning to see ourselves according to this second map

is really, really helpful because it leads us into seeing the way the Buddha saw, which is without the confusion or the falseness of the sense of self. So that's why it's useful to start to explore and to look at it in our own experience. It's also not an intellectual exercise. It's primarily experiential.

And it came very alive for me at a time when my older sister died. She was five years older than me and she died when she was 51. So I guess I was 46. It had a lot of impact on me because it came suddenly and unexpectedly. She had a chronic condition, but she was nowhere near dying. There was no hint that that might happen to her. And then I got a call: your sister has passed away.

It happened at home. One of her sons was with her. She lost consciousness. They called the medics. They rushed her to the hospital, but she never revived to consciousness and died that evening. And we were pretty close, so it had a real impact on me.

I couldn't understand where she had gone. We'd had a phone call the week before, catching up on news. She had a kind of a big personality and she was a statement in the world, my sister. And so to have her go, it was bewildering. I couldn't understand how somebody that big had just gone.

The only way that I could resolve it for myself was by understanding the five aggregates and how they had been put together to make her up. And then what happens when the aggregates fall apart or break up at death? And it was that inquiry that helped me understand—you know, what happens at death, to some extent, limited extent, but to some extent, what happens at death. So I hope this will also help explain some of that. The mystery, really, of living and dying.

The Pali term for an aggregate is khandha. The Sanskrit term is skandha, so you might hear either of these in Buddhist writings. And khandha is an ordinary word in Pali. It's not a spiritual word particularly. It just means a heap or a bundle. So if you went out and gathered a bunch of kindling to start a fire, you could call that a khandha of firewood or kindling.

When we put it in English and we call it aggregate, that sounds very technical to me. It reminds me of some paving mixture that gets spread on the road when they resurface the thing. A little too scientific. So what I like better is to call it the five kinds of stuff.

So there are these five kinds of stuff that make us up, and that's what we want to go through. They are material form—you can simply call it matter—feeling tone, perceptions, formations, and consciousness. I want to go through this list and explain each one in a little detail, so we'll come to understand what a meditator can see as we are, let's say, disassembled.

Form is the first one; the Pali word is *rupa*. This word *rupa* is sometimes used to mean body—like the statue behind me is sometimes called a Buddha *rupa*, the form of the Buddha or the body of the Buddha. But the word *rupa* is wider than just body. Actually, the word for body in Pali is *kaya*. So *rupa* means something bigger than that.

Let me read you the definition from a *sutta*: "Any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—this is the material form aggregate of *rupa*." So it means all physical nature. It means this body, but also all the matter that's outside this body. And not only the matter—internal or external, near or far—it also means all the interactions among matter.

So when you put a piece of veggie burger on your tongue, the taste that comes from that is also *rupa*. When you're leaning over the Swiss chard, the smell that comes up and touches your nose is also *rupa*. So *rupa* is the world of matter and the interactions. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch are all different forms of *rupa*. This first aggregate covers the whole physical world. That's a big space.

For example, we take this physical thing and strike this physical thing. That sound that comes out is in the area of *rupa*. The sound is an aspect of form, the first aggregate. So you might sort of infer from this—the other four aggregates must be mental, and they are. If you're looking for a complete description of mentality from a Buddhist point of view, the four aggregates is a very good description of what makes up mentality.

The second aggregate is feeling tone. The Pali term is *vedanā*. I think we've talked about this quite a bit—we introduced it in the instructions. It's the quality in every type of sense contact that it's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. *Vedanā* forms the second foundation of mindfulness. Sally talked about the body as being the first foundation. *Vedanā* is the second. And this points to the importance of this factor in the whole of the Buddha's teachings.

Why is this quality of *vedanā* given such importance—second aggregate, second foundation of mindfulness, very central? The reason is that it forms the basis for reactive formations of mind. Greed, aversion, and delusion arise based on feeling tone being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. So a pleasant feeling tone—the habitual reaction to that is greed. An unpleasant feeling tone—the habitual reaction is aversion. And the neutral feeling tone—the habitual reaction is delusion, sort of overlooking or not caring about.

When one hears the sound of the bell, generally that's experienced as pleasant, isn't it? The tone is chosen to be pleasant, the striker to be pleasant, but more especially because the sitting's over. So that has quite a pleasant feeling tone.

When we first start to tune into feeling tone, we tend to think that it's intrinsic to the object—that the sense object has an innate quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. But that's not the case. If that were the case, feeling tone could be part of matter. The feeling tone, though, is not intrinsic to the sound. It's really about how the sound lands in your mind. And it's ultimately your mind that determines whether it gets interpreted or received as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither.

Simple example: some people like the taste of beets. I don't. Beets taste to me like dirt. So that's not

experienced as a pleasant form of *rupa* to me.

Another example, and this is quite amusing: there was a 7-Eleven in Southern California where drug dealing was taking place in the parking lot.

And this was disconcerting to the manager of the store because when drugs were being dealt, other customers didn't feel comfortable parking and coming into the store. So he would ask them to leave, and they wouldn't. He'd ask the police to come, and they'd run away for half an hour, and then they'd be back. And so he had to figure out a different strategy.

So he thought, "I'll play some music." The music he chose to play was Mantovani. I don't know if you remember Mantovani. He was a composer from the 1950s who had these very lush accompaniments to movie scores—swelling strings that were very melodic and sentimental. So he put Mantovani on and blasted it through the store's loudspeakers. The drug dealers couldn't stand it, so they all cleared out.

My mother was a great fan of Mantovani. She found it very pleasant. They didn't. So the feeling tone is not in the thing—it's in our mind receiving it.

Ajahn Sucitto, who we've mentioned a few times, talks about feeling almost as a verb, how the mind kind of feels into the sense contact to determine whether it's going to be interpreted as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither.

Another thing that's interesting is you'll find that the feeling tone of some sense experiences changes depending on your meditative state of mind. So when you're first settling into a meditation and there's some pressure on the seat or pressure in the knee, that's easily experienced as unpleasant. As the mind settles more—let's say concentration strengthens and equanimity is stronger—the exact same sensation can be experienced as neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It's quite interesting. So you can explore that. The feeling tone can change for each of us.

The third aggregate is called perception. The Pali term is saññā. This means something a little different in Buddhism than normal perception in Western language, philosophical or psychological. Often Western language interprets or defines perception as the sense contact itself. So it would talk about the perception meaning the sound or perception meaning the sight. But in Buddhism it's not the bare sense contact—it's the recognition of it, and recognition in terms of what we already know, or we could say in terms of memory.

So for example, as you look around the room, typically you can pick out objects. There are people and shawls and cushions and chairs and floors and a bell and flowers and statues. So as you look around the room, you're identifying different things that are in the visual field. It's that categorization that is the perception.

The visual field is really just form and color, isn't it? Sometimes you can see this better by closing one eye.

You take the two dimensions out and mostly what you see are just patches or shapes with certain colors. But we've learned to interpret them as specific objects—people or chairs or whatever. But what's interesting is it's become so automatic we don't realize that this categorization is something we've learned how to do. We did it so young, and we've done it for so long, we've lost track of that. And so we tend to look around the room and think the visual field is made up of different objects. It's not like that. The visual field is made up of patches of form with color, but we've interpreted them.

So this is an interesting story from Oliver Sacks, the neurologist, and you know how he really was so great at identifying places in human experience that were a little outside the norm and using that to shed light on our normal experience. So he was attending to a man, a man whose name was Virgil, who had lost his sight when very, very young, probably in infancy. Virgil had met a surgeon who was able to do an operation on his eyes that restored his sight. And when this happened, Virgil was, I think, in his forties. So he had been blind for probably forty years or so, and then had this operation, and the family and the doctors were all gathered around his bedside in order to remove the bandages after the surgery.

So the bandages were peeled away and everybody was waiting expectantly, like Virgil was going to go, "Wow, this is so fantastic, I can see again." But that didn't happen. In fact, as Sacks describes it, Virgil seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing at the surgeon who stood before him still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke—saying, "Well?"—did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face.

Virgil told him later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur came a voice that said, "Well." Then and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face, and indeed the face of his surgeon.

So what had happened is that his ability to perceive had not formed because he had lost his sight too young. And that part of the brain that puts it all together didn't develop as a normal person's would.

So when he came back to seeing in his 40s, he had not learned how to make sense of the patches of form and color. As the years went by, he developed more ability and could function well in a simple environment where he had learned to identify the components. But he was not at ease. He was never at ease again going out into the street or the wider world or really unfamiliar places. Some of that wiring of perception never quite got completed again for him.

We are perceiving all the time. It's happening more or less automatically. We tend not to notice it, but we can start to tune into it. Normally we do that when something unusual happens, but we can tune into it any time we start to notice a thing—something standing out from the visual field that we single out and identify.

Another thing to take in about perception is that it involves categorization into familiar objects, but it also

carries with it some kind of meaning or association, a kind of emotional tone. For instance, if I say to you the word "car," it probably doesn't evoke a big emotional response. For me anyway, the word car has fairly neutral associations.

But what if I say to you the word "Prius" or "electric vehicle"? Do you get a nice glow out of that? I do. I love the environmental consciousness behind the Prius and behind electric vehicles. I think, "Oh, these are trying to save the planet, and people who drive them are really trying to make a contribution to environmental well-being." I don't think all those thoughts when I see a Prius, but I just feel warmly about Priuses—or Prii, if that's what the plural is.

Similarly, when I see a Ferrari going down the road, I may experience a touch of envy, but mostly I think about, "Do they really need twelve cylinders on a suburban street? And isn't that a little damaging to the environment?" So I have a different emotional response just on seeing a Ferrari. I hope none of you own Ferraris—I haven't offended anyone. I didn't see any in the parking lot.

Very simply, we have these immediate responses to things that we've known well. Think about a friend. When you perceive a friend, there's a whole emotional tone that comes just in the moment of recognition. Or your child, or a mother, or father, or your partner. Perception often carries with it real connection and meaning and flavor for us.

Sometimes if we just stay with the label in which we've put a thing, we don't see it so clearly. We have an unpleasant sensation and we label it "pain"—the very label of pain can prevent us from going back in and feeling what exactly is that sensation. The name can block the direct experience of what's actually happening.

Another example: Take this thing. Normally we think this is a bell, but I've known some monks whose begging bowls were about this size and it made quite a good meal receptacle. Or we could imagine taking it out and using it as a nice little chapeau atop some statue. Wouldn't this be a cute cap for a rather larger figure? It could be that. It could also be a great planter, couldn't it? Wouldn't it be nice to have a little Bodhi tree in here, up on the platform?

So if we just think it's a bell, we're missing something about it. We're not really seeing its thusness, you could call it, or its suchness. In Zen, this is a kind of common koan: "What is this? If you call it a stick, I will hit you. But if you say it's not a stick, I will hit you too. What is it?"

What I got from that is that if I went to Zen a lot, I was going to get hit. That was partly why I chose vipassana.

There's another story about perception and seeing the thing as it is and not getting lost in concepts. Back in the late seventies, some friends of ours in Cambridge understood that there were two masters in town from different Buddhist traditions. One was Sansanim, a Korean Zen master—very wise, very powerful. The other was Kalu Rinpoche, one of the most respected Kagyu masters of our lifetimes. They thought it

would be very interesting to bring them together. They rather imagined that these two masters would sort of just immediately recognize each other's enlightened nature and kind of dissolve into the bliss of emptiness together.

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And they thought it would be very interesting to bring them together. They rather imagined that these two masters would just immediately recognize each other's enlightened nature and dissolve into the bliss of emptiness together. So they brought them over for tea and thought they would engage in some deep conversation. Each had a translator.

Sansanim took the first step. He picked up an orange off the plate, held it out to Kalu Rinpoche, and said, "What is this?"

Kalu Rinpoche just sat there quietly doing his beads, his mala, probably just reciting some mantra. He didn't reply.

So Sansanim thought he was missing it, and he held it out again and said, "What is this?"

Kalu turned and said something to his translator, and the translator said, "Don't they have oranges in Korea?"

This is a little bit of cross-cultural missing, which is easy to do.

So when we're sitting and we hear that sound, we recognize that's the bell. We recognize it is the bell to end a sitting. That's our momentary, immediate perception. It doesn't require thought. It just happens by itself. That's the third aggregate.

The fourth aggregate is called volitional formations. The Pali term is *sankara*. These are sometimes also translated as mental formations. This is the whole world we've been exploring—we could call it objects of mind: thoughts and emotions, moods, mind states. As such, it includes the refined states of meditation. Mindfulness, concentration, calm, equanimity, loving-kindness, compassion are all in here, as well as the hindrances and the difficult emotions and the beautiful emotions. They're all in this realm of mental formations, *sankaras*.

They're sometimes also called karmic formations because when you look closely, the way we form these objects of mind, they're coming out of some underlying intention. Desire is expressing an intention—often an intention to draw closer. Aversion is expressing an intention to push away or move away. Loving-kindness is expressing an intention toward someone's welfare. Compassion expresses an intention toward easing someone's suffering.

Even the beautiful states of meditation—simple things like calm, investigation, concentration—are expressing an intention because they have been developed by repeated effort for the most part. There has

been an intention in us to sustain wholesome states. So they are also volitional. Their strength in us is the result of our own effort and volition and will.

For instance, when hearing the sound of the bell, there's often a sense of relaxation. Sitting's over. I don't know if you've noticed this, but sometimes when the bell rings, I think, "Oh, now I could sit forever." As soon as it's over, it gets really easy, doesn't it? That sense of ease and even the thought, "Oh, now I can sit for a long time"—those are both volitional formations in response to the sound.

The fifth aggregate is the most subtle and really interesting one. I love the way the Buddha explained this quality. In English, we translate it as consciousness. It has a very precise meaning in the Buddhist teachings, more precise than in the West, where it's more general. In Buddhism, the Pali word used is *vijn ana*.

It is the mental faculty in every moment of our experience that holds the sense object. It's so fascinating to find this in our experience. Everything that's happening to us—hearing the bell, knowing the feeling tone, knowing the mood that comes with it, recognizing it as a sound—that's being known to consciousness because we are sentient beings. What sentience means is this quality that has experience, that knows experience.

This is not an intellectual knowing; it's the most bare form of cognizing a sense experience. As soon as there's hearing, there is consciousness in that hearing. If we were asleep, the sound might be there, but the knowing of it, the consciousness wouldn't be.

You know that old riddle: if a tree falls in the forest and there's no one around, does it make a sound? The answer is it depends how you define sound. If you just mean the vibration of the air, if you call that a sound, then there is a sound.

But if you mean the conscious experience of hearing, no. There is nobody conscious there to bring that sound into human experience.

So consciousness is just that simple revealing or holding or receiving of sense data. It's happening all the time that we're awake. It happens very automatically. You can't turn it off. Sometimes you may wish that you could, right? The sitting's gone on a long time. Mind's all over the place. There's unpleasant sensation in the body. "I wish I could just stop experiencing." But we can't. As long as we're awake, consciousness is doing its job, which is revealing data at the six senses. That's just happening.

So that's what brings this ongoing contact with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience. It's said, as the Buddha explained it, that there's a separate sense consciousness for each of the six senses. So there's eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, and so forth. But essentially, the knowing is very similar, though it acts through the six sense doors. So this is a fun thing to investigate in practice.

The way I understand it is that in an experience like this, the sound and the consciousness come up

together. They can't really be broken apart in your direct experience. In other words, the sound comes with the knowing of it. But you can separate—you can discriminate or differentiate these two aspects of what's going on in your experience.

So every sense experience for a human being arises with consciousness, but you can start to feel out what's the sense object and what's the knowing of it. It's a relationship almost like the object is being held in the consciousness, in the knowing.

Now that may sound a little odd—there's one experience, but it's got two aspects—but it's not that odd. When you look at the bell from the side, is it round or is it black? Round or black? It's both, isn't it? There's just one circle here, but it's got two aspects. You can either look at the form of it or you can look at the color. So similarly, when you hear a sound, you can either tune into the quality of sound or you can tune into your own knowing of it. And this is something that you can actually explore and feel in your meditation practice.

It's actually the consciousness that knows the sound, the feeling tone, the recognition, the mood, and the thought connected with hearing the sound of the bell.

Okay, so this is the list: form, including the matter and all the physical senses; feeling tone; perception; mental formations; and consciousness or knowing.

Is it kind of a funny list? I found this kind of a funny list when I first started to work with it. I think the funniest thing about it for me was that matter made sense, mental formations made sense, consciousness made sense—but why were feeling and perception tossed in and separated out as important as body, mind objects, and consciousness? That didn't quite make sense to me.

But what's interesting is when the Abhidhamma classifies our experience, they only put it into three categories, which is basically matter, mind objects—which they call cittasikas—and consciousness, which they call citta. So in the Abhidhamma model, they collapse feeling and perception into the fourth aggregate of mental formations. This kind of made more intuitive sense to me.

So if you want to think of your experience in terms of three aggregates, that's fine. So this talk could be the talk on the three aggregates. It works for me. But you can play with five or you can play with these three.

The important question is: does this list, whether it's five or three, include everything in your direct experience? This is something you can explore. If it does, then it's an exhaustive list. It's a good list for our purposes.

This list or this way of looking is freeing. When we start to understand it is very freeing.

Why is that?

Because there's nothing else here. There's only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

That's all there is to a human being.

What's missing? I. There's no I in the center that is looking at all this stuff. There's no I in the center that is separate from all this stuff. There's no I in the center that's owning any of this stuff. There is only form, feeling, perceptions, formations, and consciousness happening according to their own causes and conditions.

The beauty of this kind of seeing is it takes out the fiction of control. When we establish an I, it's like "queen me" or "king me" at the center of everything—we feel like it's our dominion. I should be in control of my body. I should be in control of my emotions. I should be in control of feelings. It's never worked because body, feelings, perceptions, formations, consciousness all have their own laws and causes and conditions.

Looking at the body particularly, how many times have we felt proud of our body? "Oh, I'm looking good today. Walking well today." Or on the other hand, how many times have we felt embarrassed about our body? Too big or too small? Too thin or too heavy? Too narrow or too broad? But did we have anything to do with that basic makeup? We take so much either pride or embarrassment about it. Was it our fault? Did you have anything to do with constructing the overall form of body? Whether you're tall or short, or whether your hair is curly or straight, or whether your bones are broad or narrow?

No. You know what happened. Father's sperm met mother's egg. They joined. They divided and multiplied. At a certain point, that form emerged from the womb. It was nourished by milk and water and air and light and food over years and years and years. And this is the outcome. It's a purely physical thing that has done its own thing. We've been along for the ride, you might say, but we didn't have any control over it. Why? Because it's just part of physical nature. It's not mine. It's not yours. It's just part of nature.

As such, our bodies are not very different. The differences between our bodies are really, really small compared to the similarities. Any level you look on—from DNA up to comparing side by side—we all have the same basic components.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of my teachers in Thailand. He said, "This body came out of nature, it's part of nature, and it never departed from nature. It belongs to nature, so give it back. That will be a big relief for you."

This is the way we understand all the aggregates. The body is part of physical nature. Emotions are part of human nature. Consciousness is part of a bigger nature than that—every sentient being has this factor of consciousness. We're united with the creatures in this way. Our emotions are part of human nature. Consciousness is part of all nature, all sentient nature.

So the Buddha said, "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 similarly for feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. But so often we claim it, don't we? We think "this is mine," or "I am this," or "this is myself." That's what gets us into trouble. That's not clear seeing.

When we see clearly, the Buddha said, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Why become disenchanted? Because they're all impermanent. None of them offer the possibility of lasting happiness.

So disenchanted doesn't mean we hate it, doesn't mean it's disgusting, doesn't mean we're averse to it. We just see, oh, it doesn't have the promise to bring me lasting happiness. So we kind of let go and stop looking there.

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.

So this teaching on not-self goes deep. It is the way through understanding impermanence to let go of clinging through all the forms of sense experience to any of the five aggregates. And in that letting go, the mind rests, and in the deep resting and non-resistance becomes liberated.

In the shorter term, I'll just relate this quote from an old Sri Lankan monk. Jack Kornfield went to visit him, I think when Jack was still in robes. A very happy being, had been in robes a long time, just had a lot of joy. The monk wanted to check Jack out. So he said, "What's your understanding of the central teaching of Buddhism?"

And Jack said, "My understanding is there's no actual separate self within this mind-body process."

And the old monk just nodded and said, "No self, no problem." He just laughed and laughed.

So this is the message: when we understand properly, it's just causes and conditions. No self, no problem.

Let's just sit for a minute together. Therefore all should be seen as it really is with proper wisdom thus: This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.

Thank you for listening.

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