# The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:32

The subject tonight is the five aggregates are not self. This evening I want to continue our exploration of this understanding of not self—one of the Buddha's central teachings and, I'd say, one of the most liberating. It offers a great deal of promise, but it's also one of the most difficult to understand.

As you listen this evening, don't have the idea that you have to figure it all out tonight or you'll miss it completely. The purpose of a talk like this is to plant seeds that go in conceptually. Then what happens in meditation, when there's a topic we're interested in, is that the subconscious mind chews on it in the silence. From time to time in that silence, intuition comes out with new understanding.

We're really about seeding this as a question to explore and for your intuition to work on. You don't have to figure it out conceptually. Let it come in, let it pass through. If it doesn't make sense, don't struggle too hard to figure it out. Let land what lands for you.

Central to the Buddha's teaching is this understanding that the sense of self each of us carries is not really intrinsic to being human, to being alive, but rather is a concept we have generated. If we don't understand it correctly, it creates a deep form of bondage for us, a deep sense of suffering.

You could say that our belief in this sense of self is one of the primary meanings of the word ignorance, which in the chain of dependent origination is viewed as the beginning link that leads into suffering. It's a very fundamental misunderstanding.

When we truly believe in the self without understanding it correctly, it leads to a sense of duality between self and other, between ourselves and the world, setting up a degree of tension, separation, isolation, and anxiety. When we cling to this idea without properly understanding it, we box ourselves into a corner that's not very pleasant. There's a deep existential missing, a lack that comes from an unquestioned belief in this sense of self.

Much of the purpose of spiritual practice is to liberate us from this false understanding. There's a beautiful quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj, a teacher of Advaita Vedanta who lived in Bombay and died in the 1990s. He was a very powerful teacher, and many of his sayings are collected in a book called *I Am That*, which I highly recommend. From the yogic tradition, he was deeply interested in wisdom as a path to liberation. Though he spoke in terms of yoga, his teaching also applies to our path.

He said, "All the yogas have only one aim, and that is to save you from the calamity of separate existence."

Right now, being unliberated, we are all engaged with the calamity of separate existence—believing

ourselves separate from the rest of the world with the attendant isolation and fear that brings.

We want to understand how this sense of self comes about. We want to understand that it's not a necessary element of our human experience. And we want to understand how to move beyond it, how to see through this false sense.

For most of us, this sense of I and self is revealed when we use the words I, me, and mine. Anytime you find your thoughts going there, the sense of self is at play. It can be correctly understood or misunderstood. There's no problem with using the words I and my—once we understand correctly, we use them conventionally and there's no problem.

We have to identify in talking to one another where an action is taking place. If I just said "feeling angry," you wouldn't know where the anger was located. Is it in you? In me? In Annie? So we say "I'm feeling angry" just to identify the location of an experience when talking to one another.

But when you're describing your own experience to yourself, is that word I really necessary? We'll see. Maybe not.

There's this social convention of you and I that makes complete sense. We have to understand that when we leave the room, you'll go to your room and I'll go to my room. If we didn't understand that, things would get really chaotic. These are very useful conventions, but don't get deceived that there's more being pointed to than is actually there.

For most of us, not having examined this sense, everything revolves around this sense of I—our thoughts, actions, plans, future, intentions, motivations. The I is kind of the center of the universe for us, and yet we haven't quite understood it fully.

This sense of self seems self-evident, as it were—pun intended. But have you ever been able to find it? By looking through your direct experience in meditation, when your mind is calm and your inner vision is clear, have you ever been able to locate the self, the I? Somehow I suspect you haven't.

William James, the psychologist, said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." He's getting closer than many of us do.

The Dalai Lama said, "When we think something is clear, but we can't actually find it, that's a sure sign of delusion."

This is our relationship to the I. We think it's really obvious, the center of the universe, but we can't get a hold of it. The classical analogy for this is like looking at a piece of colored rope lying on the ground—strands of beige and red and green—and we look at it and think it's a snake. When we perceive it as a snake, we get scared. But when our perception gets corrected and we see it's a piece of rope, we can calm down.

The same thing happens with this sense of I. When we believe in it strongly, we get scared. When perception gets corrected, there's a sense of inner freedom and ease. So this is not an intellectual exploration. This is an exploration that goes very deep to our sense of being in the world, to our existential dilemma, and will possibly solve much of our existential predicament.

There is confusion around the use of the word "I," and we can see it by looking at ordinary language. For instance, if I ask, "How old are you?" That's a simple question, right? You might say, "I'm thirty-nine" or whatever. But when you say "I'm thirty-nine," that's really not quite correct. Are your thoughts thirty-nine years old? Is your mood thirty-nine years old? Is this strand of hair thirty-nine years old? No, we really mean the body is thirty-nine years old. So here, you're equating the I with the body. The body is thirty-nine years old, I'm thirty-nine years old, so I am the body.

But let me ask another question: What color are your eyes? This is simple. "My eyes are brown." Oh. Now the I is not the body. It's something separate that owns the body. These are my eyes. So the I has now become the owner of the body. You don't say, "I'm brown." You say, "My eyes are brown."

So which are you? Are you the body or are you the owner of it? Can you be both? How many selves are you right now? Generally, if somebody thinks they're more than one self at a given moment, we give them medication. So look at this question and see: can you really be both?

We could look at it another way. We say "I'm happy" or "I'm sad," and there we're the emotion. The I is being equated with the emotion. But then a minute later we could talk about "my joys" and "my sorrows," and now we're the owner of the emotion. So are you the body, the owner of the body, the emotion, or the owner of the emotion?

There's another way that we often take ourselves to be located, and that is as the observer. Check this out. This one goes deep for most people. We think that the I is located inside the head, behind the eyes and between the ears. This little being is kind of looking out at the world and taking it all in. I'm seeing sights, I'm hearing sounds, I'm smelling smells, and so forth. So there's the sense of I being a little observer, a little person in the center of the head to whom all this is happening. That's the fifth way that we form a sense of I.

And another way that we do it is by saying, "Yeah, that's right, I'm all those things. I'm the body, I'm the owner of it, I'm the emotions, I'm the owner of those, and I'm the observer looking out on everything. I'm all of that."

Can this all be true? Where is the I really?

It's quite strange the way we use language around the self, but we don't examine what I would call these faulty assumptions of logic. It doesn't really make sense when we look closely.

The Buddha's comment on this is profound: all of those ways of conceiving self are not true. "In whatever

way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." However you take yourself to be—in one of these six ways—the fact is ever other than that.

These six ways of creating selfhood we call identification. Identification in Buddhist terms means that we create a sense of I by pointing to a facet of our experience—like the body or the owner of the body, the emotion or the owner of the emotion, or the observer. We point to a facet of experience and say, "That's I." But when you really think about it, the self is bigger than any of those, isn't it? Your human experience is bigger than any of those fragments. Yet we identify with, we take ourselves to be, these limited pieces.

One of my teachers put it even more bluntly than the Buddha did. He said, "Everything you think is wrong." And about the self, that is kind of true until we've seen it clearly. Everything we think is wrong.

This reminds me of a comment from talk radio. I'm not a fan of talk radio—I think a lot of delusion goes across those airwaves—but one commentator made this observation, which I thought was pretty good: "The mind: often wrong, seldom in doubt."

This belief in the I is actually a fiction created by thought. There's no reality to it in the way that we commonly use these terms.

Here's a quotation from the Buddha. His attendant Ananda—who was his cousin, his attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life, and one of the sweetest people in the whole Pali canon—came to the Buddha and said (he was always asking for teachings), "Venerable sir, you often say the world is empty. The world is empty. What does it mean that the world is empty?"

The Buddha replied, "The world is empty because it is empty of a self or what belongs to a self." Meaning within this world of our experience, there's no I and there's no my. Those terms don't really apply.

So how did the Buddha see, if these conventional perceptions aren't correct? When we look out in a room like this, I think we mostly see persons, right? We look around and we see different persons sitting around the dharma hall. Along with the chairs and mats and walls, we see persons.

But in the Visuddhimagga, which is a meditation manual from the fifth century in Sri Lanka, the text says that this is not a very refined perception, and they compare it to a butcher's work. I'm reluctant to use this analogy because I've been a vegetarian for about forty years and I love animals, but it's in the text, so I'm going to relate it.

They said that if a butcher is carving up the carcass of a cow, as they cut, they're not saying "cow, cow, cow." They would say something like "rump, tenderloin, sirloin, ribs," because they are really well acquainted with that body. The Visuddhimagga says that one who has carefully investigated the process of human mind and body would not say "person." They would look at what makes up a person, having seen it in more detail than just "person."

So how did the Buddha see? When he looked at a human being, how did he see? I don't think he saw

"person."

I believe he saw in one of two ways. The first way is illustrated by this discourse called the Discourse on Totality. Let me read this:

"Bhikkhus"—which means you practitioners—"what is the totality of things? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality."

First of all, this is a very bold thing to say. Have you ever heard any teacher say they were going to teach you the totality? We've had some great intellectuals in the last hundred years. Marx didn't say this. Freud didn't say this. Einstein didn't say this. But here's the Buddha 2,500 years ago...

Listen, attend. I'm going to teach you the totality of things. What is the totality? It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe something beyond this totality would not be speaking of something they knew about.

I love this sutta. First of all, I think it's profoundly radical that a great figure—spiritual or intellectual—points to the most important things to examine as being our human experience itself. Marx pointed to the socio-economic system. Einstein pointed to the way physical objects interact with each other. Many other teachers spun out philosophical theories about what's beyond and what's down here. The Buddha said, look at your own direct experience.

This really sounds the opening bell for Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and meditation practice. It is all about our own personal experience: the sense organs and their objects—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mind—and their corresponding objects. This is why our meditation practice reflects this understanding. Notice how often we give instructions about noticing the elements of these six senses. That's what insight meditation is all about.

So that's the first approach: to see the six sense bases and their objects. The second approach the Buddha used is called the five aggregates. I'm going to explore that in a moment, but I'll just say the five aggregates cover the same territory of human experience, but divide it up differently.

The Buddha used these two schemas somewhat differently. He generally used the six sense bases to point out craving and to let go of craving as the cause of suffering, leading into the third noble truth—the end of craving. He used the five aggregates to point out wrong view and to lead into right view. This is the first spoke on the Eightfold Path and the expression of wisdom. The five aggregates are used to lead us into right understanding.

Basically, when we learn to see as the Buddha saw, we see things without this fiction of self. That's the power of this teaching of the five aggregates. This is not an intellectual exercise. It's an investigation that really has the power to open up our understanding in a direct and personal way.

One of my sisters died when I was in my mid-forties. She'd been ill, but she was not anywhere close to dying as far as any of us knew. But one evening at her home, she went into a faint. Her son was there and called an ambulance. On the way to the hospital, before she could reach there and be treated, she went into cardiac arrest and did not come out. So she died suddenly and unexpectedly, and it threw me into a lot of questioning.

I was a practitioner by then, and I couldn't understand how my sister had seemed so solid the week before I talked to her on the phone. She always had a big personality and a big laugh. She was a very alive, dynamic person, and now she was just gone. I'm sure most of you have had experiences like this also—how somebody living can just be gone in a moment.

This was the first time it had really struck me how I couldn't comprehend what had happened to her. As I reflected on it over the next couple of months—because I was in stages of grieving—the most helpful way for me to understand it was looking at it through the five aggregates. Coming to understand who she was in terms of the five aggregates helped me come to terms with her death. Because I understood her situation better, it also helped me understand my situation better when I considered my own death.

Maybe at the end I'll try to remember to bring this back and talk a little about what I learned in this investigation. At any rate, I find the schema of the aggregates really helpful for understanding our experience in a very freeing way. That's part of what I want to share this evening.

The English word "aggregate" is a translation of the Pali word *khandha*. I never liked the term aggregate because it sounded too technical to me—like somebody mixing up road paving material or some chemist in a lab putting stuff together that they were going to patent. It sounded much too technical.

The term that I prefer is "kinds of stuff." We human beings are made up of five kinds of stuff. That's a little more in line with the spirit of the teaching—the Pali term *khandha* just meant heap or bundle. So we're these bundles of stuff. The Buddha talked about five of them: material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.

I want to talk about each of these tonight. As I do, I want you to be investigating whether this list provides a comprehensive description of your human experience.

In other words, is there anything in your ordinary human experience that isn't included in this list? Or can we say, yes, this is an exhaustive description of what I experience. That's what we're interested in—this exhaustive listing of what we're made up of.

Material form is simply the world of physical matter, which means this body and all the physical matter outside this body. So the whole physical world is included in this category of material form. The Pali term is rupa. Also included are all the interactions between physical form. For instance, if I take one piece of matter and strike another piece of matter, the resultant sound is also in the realm of physical form. So when you take a piece of Indian curry and you place it on your tongue, the taste is also part of physical

form. When you smell the lunch as you're standing in the queue, that smell is also part of physical form. So the physical sense objects—sight, sound, smell, taste and sensations—are all part of this category. All the matter in the world and this body. So this is the whole physical world and the physical sense objects. This is all part of the first aggregate.

That's a big piece of reality, isn't it? It's a big piece of our world. So what's left must be the mind stuff. The other four aggregates are all mental.

The second aggregate is feeling tone, which I think we've talked about quite a lot, both in the instructions. Sally gave a whole talk on it as the second foundation of mindfulness. I'll just mention that the reason I think this is included as a separate aggregate is because it's so crucial to the arising of greed, aversion, and delusion. Pleasant feeling tone has a tendency to stimulate wanting. Unpleasant feeling tone tends to stimulate aversion. Neutral feeling tone tends to stimulate delusion. So it is very central in the links to suffering.

For instance, in this sound, most of us would experience that as a pleasant feeling tone. But it's not universal. If you were in the middle of a really wonderful sitting and you thought enlightenment was just about two minutes away, do you think this would be pleasant? Not necessarily. So we can experience a different feeling tone dependent on our background and mood and tastes. The feeling tone is a mental reaction to the physical stimulus—in this case, the sound.

The third aggregate is perception. The Pali is saññā. And Carol gave a whole talk on this, so I think it's been pretty well covered. Just to mention that it's the faculty of recognition that we take sense objects and place them into familiar categories. So for instance, in looking around the room, we tend to categorize things as window, chair, floor, wall, person, clothes, mat, cushion, and so on.

This is actually a learned association. There's an age at which these circuits wire in the brain and we learn to make sense—for instance in this case of the visual field—by putting these objects into categories. And if that hasn't been learned at an early age, it's very difficult to fill in later.

Sometimes we don't see things the way they are because of a label. For instance, if you're really accustomed to seeing this as a meditation bell, and you look at it and you go, "bell," you might miss its potential as a really wonderful alms bowl for a monk or a nun. Somebody could hold a lot of food in this as a bowl. I had a friend who was a monk in Chiang Mai whose bowl was about this big, and his girth matched the size of the bowl.

Or you might forget that you could turn it upside down and this could be a really cute little hat on a statue. Or it could be used as a planter. We could have a beautiful growth of flowers from this. So if we just say "meditation bell" and we stop there, we don't necessarily see what's really there.

There are a lot of Zen koans about this. A Zen master will hold this up and say, "What is this? If you say it is a stick, I will hit you. If you say it is not a stick, I will hit you."

Wow, that's why I didn't sit Zen. I knew I was going to get hit a lot.

Oh, there's a funny story about perception along these lines.

Some friends in Cambridge years and years ago were hosting a meeting between two very, very distinguished spiritual teachers. Kalu Rinpoche was a highly regarded Lama in the Tibetan Kagyu school, and Seung Sahn was a very inspiring Korean Zen master. They both happened to be in Cambridge at the same time, so some friends brought them together thinking, "Wow, this will be amazing. One enlightened mind seeing another enlightened mind. It'll just be emptiness reflecting emptiness. And we might get enlightened just from the contact."

So they brought them together in a friend's living room and served them tea and snacks. Seung Sahn started the dialogue, and coming from a tradition where koans are used extensively, he picked up an orange and held it out toward Kalu Rinpoche asking, "What is this?"

Kalu just sat there and counted his beads on his mala, keeping a smile on his face. Seung Sahn wasn't getting the response he wanted, so he held the orange out again and repeated, "What is this?" Kalu just kept doing his mala, then turned to his translator and whispered something. The translator said to the group, "Don't they have oranges in Korea?"

This is playing with perception. Can we see things just fresh, not necessarily just as a category? Can we see without so much the veil of memory? That's the challenge of this aggregate.

But at any rate, when we hear the bell, we recognize that it usually means the end of a sitting. So it's usually a pretty pleasant sound.

The fourth aggregate we call mental formations. I think we've talked about this before. This includes all our thoughts, strong emotions—desire and fear and sadness, anger and so forth—moods, background moods like nostalgia or feeling a little blue, contentment, and refined meditative states. All the qualities of mindfulness and concentration, equanimity, loving-kindness, compassion—all these wholesome meditative states are also in this basket of mental formations or *sankharas*. So it's basically all the factors of mind that flow through. This is the biggest assemblage of mind objects that we're pointing to.

So hearing the bell, when it happens, you might feel immediately relaxed—the sitting's over, oh, now I can relax. That mood is one of the *sankharas*. And you might have the thought, "Oh, now I could sit forever." Sometimes the sitting gets really easy after the bell rings. So that thought would also be a mental formation.

The fifth aggregate is a really interesting one, and one that we may not have paid much attention to before we started to meditate—consciousness. The Pali word is *vijnana*. Now in Western languages, consciousness might mean something really broad. In psychology or philosophy, it can mean many different things and has broad meanings and interpretations. Like in the seventies, we spent a lot of time

consciousness-raising, looking at issues of gender and race and privilege and so forth, raising our consciousness about all those issues. That's not what it means in the aggregates or generally in Buddhist terms.

This word *vijnana* is really, really simple in Buddhist language. It is the bare faculty of knowing sense data. So for instance, when you first hear the bell, just the fact that that sound arises for you, the bare knowing of the sound itself—it's *vijnana* that reveals that.

There are different kinds of knowing that happen in relation to this sound. There's the knowing of just the bare sound. You might be someone with perfect pitch and you'd say, "Oh, that's F sharp." That would be a different kind of knowing. There might be the perception, "Oh, this is the bell at the end of the meditation session." That's a kind of knowing. There might be the recognition, "Oh, that goes in the aggregate of *rupa*." That's a thought—that's a kind of knowing.

Consciousness is the simplest kind of knowing that there can be. It's just—I don't know how else to say it—knowing, receiving, or making appear to us the bare sense data of our experience.

We are all sentient beings. What sentience means is that we're having conscious experience. When you think about times when you fainted, or were in deep sleep, or under general anesthesia, those were times when—as far as we know, as far as I've ever remembered—conscious experience was not occurring. I wasn't having sense experiences in those situations. But when you're awake, conscious experience is happening through the six sense doors, and it's the faculty of consciousness that allows them to arise and be known. I don't know how else to say it. Do you get a sense of this?

The simplest kind of knowing that reveals our sense objects.

Here's an example. You know that old riddle: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is present, does it make a sound? This is a seeming paradox, but it's really just because sound hasn't been well defined. So let me put it this way: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there, does it create a wave of air pressure at a certain frequency? Yes. Is that a sound? Well, it could be or it could not—it depends how you define it. But if a person is there and that sound wave hits the person's ear and the ear is working, does a sound arise in that person's experience? Yes. That's the moment of conscious experience. Consciousness is what lets that sound arise and be known.

It's very interesting to investigate: every part of our experience as waking human beings has this element of consciousness in it. In every moment of experience, consciousness is present and its functioning is revealing what's in that moment. When you look into it a little more, as you hear that sound, there are two things going on. One is the physical sound in your experience. The other is that you're having a moment of hearing consciousness that knows it. These two things are not separate.

The way I understand it is that the sound and the consciousness come right together. You can't have one without the other. So I regard it as a unitary experience, but we can look at either the physical aspect of

the sound or we can look at the mental aspect of the consciousness. We can tune our attention to either one of those.

Now how can one experience have two aspects? Is this round or is it black? You can look at it either way, can't you? You can notice the roundness of it, or you can notice the blackness of it. In the same way, as you investigate your sense experience, you can either notice the bare data—the five physical senses, thoughts and emotions—or you can notice this activity of consciousness that's always taking place because you are a sentient being. It's always there and it can be tuned into.

This becomes a very interesting meditation pathway. Most of our instructions are about noticing the objects of our senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions. But in each of those experiences, we could equally well notice the consciousness aspect. We can tune into the knowing because that's right there with every object. Tuning into the knowing turns out to be a really interesting meditation exercise. We're not going to go into it anymore tonight, but I wanted to lay the background for that.

So these are the five aggregates: material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Is there anything in your experience that doesn't fit? I'm not going to do a big Q&A on this, but I'll leave it to you to investigate. I'm going to suggest that this is an exhaustive description of our human experience. I'll leave you to confirm it or ask about it later.

What's significant about this? There's one really central term that is not included: me. There is no "I" or self or center in the aggregates. Our whole human experience is just form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. There's no one at the center who owns it.

There's no one in the center to whom it's all happening. There's no little observer in the center that's noticing it all. Truthfully, this thing that we thought of as the observer that was inside the head is only identification with consciousness. When we say "I'm seeing, I'm hearing, I'm tasting," actually it's consciousness that sees, consciousness that hears, consciousness that tastes. But when we identify the I with that fragment, we get the sense of the observer. But there's no observer there. There's only consciousness carrying out its work of knowing. That's what creates a sense of the observer.

So that's why looking at the aggregates as describing our experience is freeing—because we start to understand this mind-body process without the addition of an I. Truth to tell, the six sense objects do the same thing. And that's why in every moment of mindfulness, you are helping to unravel the sense of self. Every time you're directly with a breath, a sensation, a sound, a thought, a feeling, a sight, you're giving priority to that object and you're not whipping up the drama of self.

Where do you start whipping up the drama of self? When you start proliferating in thoughts. And that happens a lot. So take a look: when the mind is not with the sense objects, with mindfulness, where is it dwelling? It goes into thinking. What do you think about primarily? Isn't it I, me and mine? When you look at what gives your thoughts the juice, the passion, the energy, the investment, isn't it I, me, and mine?

Take a look at where your thoughts go.

This proliferating tendency that tends to dwell around I, me, and mine, is called *papañca*. The thoughts spin, and what do they spin around? Self. When they spin around self, look at what's fueling them. Do these thoughts have emotional energy? Often they do, don't they? When you come back from a thought excursion, are you more peaceful, more settled, more calm, more equanimous? Or does a thought excursion tend to stir up greed, aversion, and delusion?

These thought excursions of *papañca* are not so innocent. They're not so neutral. They involve us more and more in the concerns of the self. And they involve us then in different degrees of suffering.

So we start to look at this makeup of the mind-body process that we call a human being. And it's fine to talk about a human being, but we start to understand there is nothing in the center of all this that we can point to and say, "That's me, that's I, that's the true self." Because properly understood, this is just a collection of parts. Being human is just a collection of parts—the material part, feeling, perception, formations, and then the consciousness part.

I like to think of it really in three parts rather than five. One is the body and the physical sense impressions. The other is all the stuff that goes on in the mind—so I would lump feeling, perception, and formations in one category that I'd call mental factors. And the third is the consciousness, the knowing faculty.

So let's think of it as those three parts. In the texts they use the classical analogy of a chariot, but I couldn't bring one into the room. Everybody recognize what this is? From the back you can probably see it's a pen. We say that it's a common object; everybody agrees this is a pen. But what is a pen, really? Is a pen a thing? Or is the pen just an assemblage of parts?

Because lo and behold, I've got a cap, I've got an ink cartridge, I've got a spring, and I've got a barrel. Is this a pen? No. It's the pieces of a pen, right? But it's not a pen until we put it together again.

And when I take the right pieces and assemble them in a certain way, now I've got a pen. And everybody would agree. So a human being is a collection of these pieces assembled in a certain way—body with physical senses, mental factors like love, hate, desire, fear, compassion, tenderness, and consciousness, this knowing faculty. That's what we are. That's all we are. And there's nothing in the center of it. There are just these pieces passing through and functioning together.

So this is what I came to see about my sister. When I had felt that she was so solid, what I had basically put together was her personality—and that's the mental formations piece. Mental formations describe a personality. That's how we know someone, through their qualities of heart and mind. I had put her mental formations, her personality, glued together with her body. And I didn't understand that they weren't a fused unit. I took her as the person that she was with her physical expression and her emotional expression. And I didn't see that those were two separate things.

When she died, the body was still there. The personality was not. That's what was so confusing to me. But then I came to understand those two had just been put together for the course of her life. They were never fused forever. And so I started to understand myself in the same way. The body is here, exists for a certain period of time, but the personality is changing all the time. You know, mental formations are born and die, born and die, born and die. They're not fused together.

So this is the way the Buddha explained it. He asked the practitioners about this question. He said, "Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?"

You know the answer, right? "Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

Now I have to understand these words the way he meant them—*dukkha* or *sukha*. *Dukkha* means something that isn't capable of giving lasting satisfaction. Remember we talked about *viparinama dukkha* and *sankhara dukkha*? It's not that it's necessarily unpleasant, but at some point it will change. And if we look closely, it's changing even in the moment. Something that's going to change, can it give lasting happiness? No.

So is it ultimately unsatisfying or can it give lasting happiness? The bhikkhus, being very smart, said, "Suffering, venerable sir." It doesn't mean it's unpleasant. It doesn't mean it's *dukkha dukkha*, but it's incapable of giving lasting satisfaction.

"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: This is mine. This I am. This is myself?"

So this is really the crux of it. The Buddha is asking, do you want to pin your happiness and your identity on what is impermanent, unsatisfying, and subject to change? It's kind of like, why would we do that? If we knew that was coming, why would we do that? Build a self and a whole identity around that.

And the bhikkhus said, "No, venerable sir, it is not fit to regard them as this is mine, this I am, this is myself."

And then he went through the same question with the other four aggregates. So he had them examine feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. And what he said is that all of these components are arising and passing, but there is no self that's continuing, independent of these. This continuity is important. When you look into the assumptions around a self, there are embedded assumptions about what a self means, about what "I" means.

The central embedded assumption is continuity. We believe that the self continues over time, but that's opposed to the transitory nature of all the aggregates. Our experience is not continuing over time, but we think the self is. We think "I am."

In some ways, we feel like, "Oh, I'm the same person that was in that third grade class learning arithmetic." And the problem with that is then we think, "I am the same person who at some future time is going to die." So this "I" that has been assumed to have this ongoing continuity, we see an end to that. And that's part of our existential dilemma of being human—this awareness of our own mortality.

If we consider the "I" is supposed to be continuous, that becomes a problem. If you saw yourself as arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing, moment by moment, you'd see yourself being born and dying in every moment. Then that moment at the end—what's the end of the physical life—wouldn't be so upsetting. But we don't see it that way. We think that the "I" continues and has these changing experiences. That's what's not accurate.

At any rate, this formulation of the Buddha's—"this is mine, this I am, this is myself"—is a very helpful way to notice our experience because we can turn it around as he did himself. And he said, "What is the right way to understand it?" And he said, "Therefore, all forms should be seen as it really is with proper wisdom thus: This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself." And then he repeats that for the other four aggregates.

This is a practice pointer. This is not just intellectual speculation. This is a practice pointer. When you get caught up in taking some aspect of experience as yourself or as belonging to you, try saying, "Not me, not mine, not who I am." See if you can tune into that with proper wisdom thus: not me, not mine, not who I am. Just try it. Just drop those three little phrases in when you feel like you've identified with something and see.

Another way to say this is we stop taking things so personally. So what does that mean—we stop taking things personally? Obviously there is a person here. There's a person with a whole history and conditioning and background, and our situation is very personal, our conditioning is very personal, our body is very personal. What would it mean to not take these things personally?

Let me suggest that our condition, our human situation, is made up of a personal component and a universal component. Or a better way that I like to say it than impersonal, because that almost seems to deny the personal, is universal. A personal dimension and a universal dimension to our experience.

The universal dimension we can tune into when we see ourselves as part of nature. The personal dimension is really helpful to understand, especially in relating to suffering. Whether it's our own suffering or other suffering, we see how the conditions that have generated our suffering are caused from many, many different situations, and we understand our personal background is also coming out of many different causes and conditions, and we don't invalidate those. The personal way of looking is a valid way of looking.

So in a personal way of looking, I would say I am a white, cisgender, male, middle-aged, brought up with a middle-class background, and a college education. Those are all characteristics that describe this being in

a certain way and those are all accurate. But if we just focus on the particulars of our conditions, we miss the universal peace.

So the way I like to think of the universal peace is in the here and now, in the moment, I am just an outgrowth of nature.

We look first at the body. You know, we take the body really personally. We're proud of it or we're embarrassed about it. We like the way it is in certain ways and we wish it were different in certain other ways. And somehow in all of that, there's a sense of meanness about it that feels weighty sometimes. Whether we're proud of it or we're embarrassed about it, it feels like kind of a weight.

But we forget we didn't have anything to do with the basic way this body turned up. It was the product of the meeting of our father's sperm with our mother's egg, nourished in the womb, born into the world, fed on milk and air and sun and water and solid food, and it grew, grew, grew, aged, aged, aged, until it is the way it is today, with a certain hair color and skin color and height and breadth of shoulders and athleticism or lack thereof.

Did you have anything to do with that? For sure, you can modify it slightly with diet, with exercise, with healthcare. But do you have anything to do with the basic way you turned out? Color of your eyes, color of your hair, color of your skin, height, frame. Did you even get a vote?

Yet we claim it with either pride or embarrassment. And it's just a product of physical nature.

I spent some time when I was in Thailand as a monk with Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the great forest masters of the last century. Central to his teaching was having us live very close to nature because he felt we learned so much from being in nature. This is the way he put it: "This body came from nature, grew in nature, never departed from nature, and belongs to nature. Give it back to nature. That will be a great relief for you."

So the aggregates are just part of nature.

Emotions are the same. When we have a strong feeling, we look at the personal conditions and history that have led to its arising. But if we drop into the moment without the history, fear is just fear. It's not like my fear is any different than your fear. Joy is just joy. It's not like mine is different than yours.

We all have the whole human package. We all have this whole range of emotions. Until we're fully enlightened, then we lose some of them. But until then, we all have this same package. This is part of our mental nature. They're not unique. The situations that brought them around, the storyline behind them is unique. But the emotion, when it comes, is shared with every human being on the planet. We all have this. That's our emotional nature.

And similarly with consciousness. Consciousness is the least individual thing I can think of in the universe. It's not like some of us have a really great viññāṇa and others have a really puny viññāṇa. This knowing

quality, as far as I can tell, is the same in all of us. And I think it's also the same in frogs and cats and caterpillars. All sentient beings have this knowing faculty. There's nothing individual about it. That's also mental nature.

So when we can see the natural part of the aggregates, then we don't have to take it so personally.

"Therefore, all forms should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom. This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself. Seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, with feeling, with perception, with formations, with 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."

So let's just sit for a minute together.

Seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted. Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, one's mind is liberated.

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