The Five Aggregates Are Not-Self

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:40

The subject of this evening's talk is the five aggregates are not-self. I want to explore the Buddha's teaching on not-self through this schema of the five aggregates.

The teaching on not-self—the Pali word is anatta—is one of the most important teachings that the Buddha gave and therefore one of the most liberating things for us to possibly understand. It's also one of the hardest to understand.

Tonight, I want to put out some reflections that might serve as seeds for your meditation. This is not something that can be fully understood through conceptual thought. We use words to plant some ideas and then let them sink into your wise attention and simply hold them. You don't have to consciously hold them, but as they go in, if they're of interest to you, your subconscious will work on them. Then as meditation deepens, insights will come. This is a process that won't be solved in one night, a process that you can't figure out rationally. But take in some of the terms and wordings, let them settle, and see if insights come anyway, which they tend to do.

This teaching on not-self is paired with the Buddha's teachings on impermanence and unsatisfactoriness as the third characteristic. These are said to be the three characteristics of existence. Carol has already talked on unsatisfactoriness in the First Noble Truth and on impermanence a while back, so now we're rounding out those three characteristics.

Basically, the Buddha said that the way we tend to hold the concept of self is mistaken. This is puzzling because it seems so obvious—I'm here and you're there, and there's a self here and a self there. But when we look more deeply, it doesn't quite make sense. This belief we have in self, the deluded belief in self, is a very significant aspect of what the Buddha called ignorance—avijja—which is the start of the whole wheel of dependent origination that leads us into suffering again and again. We're going to fall into suffering as long as we keep holding onto a mistaken view of self.

I appreciate this quote from an Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj. He was a teacher of Advaita Vedanta who lived in Bombay until the 1990s when he passed away. He's from a yogic tradition, so he talks in terms of different yogic paths, but it's the same path of purification as we're involved with. He says, "All the yogas have only one aim: to save you from the calamity of separate existence." In case you didn't realize that you were in a calamity—this is to remind us it is a calamity to be involved in separate existence. It is a burden. It leads us into suffering and prevents us from flowering into happiness and love to the greatest extent possible.

When we believe the self is real, we create a duality. There's the world out there and there's us here. In that gap, there's separation, isolation, and fear—in particular, the fear of death. When we think we are a separate, solitary self, we will fear death because it means the ending of what we've taken to be our identity. But when we release the limitation of self, it opens into a much broader relationship to the world. We don't base everything around ourselves any longer, but in awareness we see that the whole world and all other beings arise within our own consciousness. We open to that more and more without this strict dualistic boundary.

Tonight, we want to understand how this idea of self gets formed and then how we can see it a little more correctly.

For most of us, the "I" is really the center of the universe. I'll use the words "I" and "self" interchangeably. We know the self is operating if we tune into our thoughts and hear these words—"I," "me," "my"—going by frequently. That's a clue. If you look closely at your thoughts, don't you hear those words often? Aren't most of the compelling thoughts about "I," "me," and "my"? That's both the sign of this incorrect understanding and the perpetuation of the belief. It's what keeps us hooked in over and over.

Our whole world tends to revolve around this concept of "I" or self. Yet it seems obvious, self-evident—but have you ever found it? It feels like it's in here somewhere, doesn't it? And yet, if you look for it, you can't find it. William James said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." He came up with more than a lot of us come up with. The Dalai Lama said, "When you think something is clear, but you can't actually find it, that's a sure sign of delusion."

We really carry around this feeling. Yeah, there's a self in here. There's an I at the center of this. And yet, we can't quite find it.

So the classical analogy in the tradition is we look at a braided rope made of different colors lying on the ground and we think it's a snake. And because we misperceive it, we get scared and we jump back. But when we slow down and look a little more closely and we see it's just a braided rope, then the fear goes out.

So the same understanding is true about our sense of the self. When we misunderstand it, we live in the fear of duality, of the ending of the self through death, of the separation from the world and the isolation. When we understand it correctly, that level of anxiety, separation, isolation, fear goes out. We live with a much more expansive relationship to life.

Our ordinary language reflects this confusion around the I. For instance, if I ask you, how tall are you? This is pretty easy. And I might say something like, I'm 5'10", or I'm 175 centimeters, or whatever. That comes easily, naturally, you don't have to think twice about it, and it's not a trick question. I'm 5'10".

But is that really all there is to it? When I say I'm 5'10", I really mean this body, right? So when I say I'm 5'10", and what I mean is the body is 5'10", then I'm equating I with the body. So here I'm basically saying I

am the body.

And then let me ask a second question. What color are your eyes? So I'd say my eyes are brown. Oh, wait, I didn't say I'm brown. I said, my eyes are brown. Now I'm someone who owns a body. The body is mine. I'm the owner of it.

So which are you? Are you the body? Are you the owner of it? Can you be both? People who really think they're multiple selves usually get taken to a hospital. So is this really tenable?

Or we could go on. Sometimes we say, I'm happy or I'm sad. And here we're equating I with emotions. But we could also talk about my joys and my sorrows. So are you the emotions or the owner of your emotions? The body or the owner of the body?

Here are four ways that we construct an I. Our language constructs an I. And there's one other way that to me is quite deeply felt. What we really think is that I is somewhere inside the head, you know, between the ears and behind the eyes. And it's sort of looking out all the time and taking in all the different experiences that come to us. So I am seeing sights. I am hearing sounds. I am tasting foods. I am thinking thoughts. And there's this little being that dwells inside the head that you might call the observer that we feel is the real me.

So these are five ways that we create a sense of self. And we express it through our language all the time without thinking anything strange is going on. But can you be five people at once? Which one are you really? So it doesn't really make logical sense the way we use the term.

And what the Buddha said is all of them are not true. And the way he put it was this: in whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that. In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that.

One of my teachers put it a little more dramatically.

He said, "Everything you think is wrong." He was trying to wake us up. It might go a little far, but it's a good provocative thing to contemplate.

I also like this comment that came over talk radio—one of the few pearls of wisdom from talk radio. The comment was: "The mind, often wrong, seldom in doubt." That describes it, doesn't it?

So the way we believe in the I, the way we believe in the self, is a fiction that's kind of created by thought. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the philosopher, said that the self is a shadow cast by grammar—a shadow cast by grammar that we haven't examined. We haven't taken the time to look into it and see what's true and what's not in our use of language.

Ānanda is one of the central figures in the Pāli discourses. He was a cousin of the Buddha who became the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. And he is one of the sweetest beings

in the Pāli canon—very warm-hearted, generous, kind, humble, very devoted to the Buddha. So he kept asking the Buddha questions to clarify his own understanding. He was not fully awakened during the Buddha's life, so he continued to ask questions to try to deepen.

At one point he came to the Buddha and he said, "The world is empty. The world is empty. What do you mean by the world is empty?"

And the Buddha replied, "The world is empty because it is empty of a self or of what belongs to a self." The world is empty of self or what belongs to a self. Basically, it's empty of I and my. There's no real foundation for I and my.

But our world doesn't feel like that, does it? Is your world empty of I and my? Mine isn't completely. So these notions keep coming up. We keep kind of believing in them. And a long meditation retreat is a time to really question them.

There's this interesting passage in the Visuddhimagga. The Visuddhimagga was a compilation of meditation practices and understandings that was put together in Sri Lanka in the fifth century, primarily by one author named Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa, one of the great commentators in our tradition.

In this passage in the Visuddhimagga, the author is drawing an analogy to a butcher who is cutting up the carcass of a cow. Personally, I find this analogy a little distasteful because I've been a vegetarian for a lot of years and I'm a supporter of animal rights. However, it's in the text, so I share it in that sense.

The text says that a butcher who is carving up the carcass of a cow, with which he's very familiar, wouldn't carve it going "cow, cow, cow, cow." Because he knows that being so intimately, he would go "ribs, sirloin, tenderloin, rump." And the Visuddhimagga says, in the same way, someone who really understands their own mind and body, looking at themselves or looking at another, wouldn't say "person," wouldn't say "human being." For one who has investigated the mind-body process closely, one sees much more precisely than that.

So the question is: when the Buddha looked at a person, what did he see? And therefore, can we learn to see the same way the Buddha did? So that we just don't go "person," either for ourself or for someone else.

He saw in one of two ways. There are two main ways that he saw us.

The first is he saw us as six types of sense processes: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and so forth. This is really clear in a discourse from the Saṃyutta Nikāya called the Discourse on Totality. It says, "Bhikkhus"—which we understand as practitioners—"practitioners, what is the totality of things? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality."

First of all, this is an awesome thing to say, isn't it? We've had a lot of smart people in the West in the last hundred years. I mean, you think about Marx, you think about Freud, you think about Einstein. Did any of them say, "I'm going to teach you the totality"? No.

But here is the Buddha 2,600 years ago saying, "I'm going to teach you the totality. Listen up. Attend carefully and I will teach you 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 anything beyond this as the totality of things would not be speaking of anything they knew about." So this is it.

These are the six classes of sense organs and sense objects. I find this pretty amazing and radical. Here's the Buddha who ended up founding one of the world's great religions, and he's not going on about cosmic visions or a pantheon of deities. He says, what you need to be concerned about is your direct experience. You can't get any more down to earth than that.

This becomes the foundation for Buddhist psychology and Buddhist meditation practice. It's all about our six senses. And I'm sure you can see how our instructions have been unfolding so that we become familiar with how to be mindful of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects—mind objects being thoughts and emotions primarily. This is the domain of our practice. This is the domain of suffering. This is the domain of liberation. This is what we care about. This is what he taught about.

So this is the first way that he saw us: the six sense bases, internal and external. Bhikkhu Bodhi said that he used this map primarily to offer teachings to cut through craving, because we experience pleasure at these six sense bases. So it involves us with wanting.

But the other way that he looked at us, and the other way he taught, was to see us as the five aggregates. It's the same field of totality. He's still talking about the field of the six senses, but he's dividing it up differently. And it's a very interesting division to me. Where he used the sense bases to cut through craving, he uses the aggregates to cut through wrong view, and particularly the view of self. But it's interesting—he links it into the other two characteristics. So in a number of discourses, you really see the connection between impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. We'll get to that.

So as we tune into the way he saw people, we tune into the awakened mind. We tune into right view. And this may sound kind of intellectual—oh, the five aggregates, that sounds kind of very specialized and esoteric. But this has real implications for our lives in practice.

The time that it really came alive in my life, I was in my mid-40s, and I was a practitioner at that time. My older sister, who was 51 at the time, died unexpectedly. She'd been ill for a while, but we thought she was on a sustainable path with treatment. She seemed nowhere close to death. And one evening, she was at home with her son. She fainted, passed out. He called the ambulance. They came and picked her up. And in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, she suffered a cardiac arrest. She got to the hospital, and they were not able to revive her. So she died quite suddenly.

It was a shock to me because I had just talked to her the week before and she'd seemed relatively healthy and happy in her life and full of energy. I couldn't figure out what had happened to her. A lot of you may

have had this experience with death too. It boggles the mind how someone who was there and alive and breathing and big in their life, all of a sudden didn't exist anymore.

My sister was big in her life. She had a big personality. She laughed a lot. She had a lot of passion. Loved her family.

She was a spark, a spark in all of our lives. And then she was gone. I couldn't put it together. It was the first time in my life I'd really been brought up against this immediacy of dying and the puzzle that it brought up.

Her death threw me into a period of grief for a couple of months. Life seemed dark, and I'd wake up thinking about her not being there anymore. I'd feel depressed and missing her. I thought, there's something I need to learn from here dharmically, because I couldn't understand how she'd been so solid and then was not there.

The way that helped me understand her passing was the five aggregates. This was the first time I really took them up for serious reflection, and they made sense of it to me in a new way. As we go through this, I'll talk about how that unfolded. When I understood her death better, I could better understand my own death still in the future—I could understand the process better.

You may have heard mention of the five aggregates earlier in this retreat, because I think Carol mentioned them when she talked about the first noble truth. As the Buddha goes through his list of all the things that are dukkha, one of the things he names is the five aggregates subject to clinging, upādāna. Since this is the totality of our experience, he's basically saying our experience subject to clinging is unsatisfactory. It's a really important statement.

Let's talk a little about this word "aggregate." It's a translation of the Pali term khandha. In Sanskrit, the word is skandha. I don't really like the translation of "aggregate"—I've never liked it because it sounds so technical. It sounds like road paving material: pebbles and tar and I don't know what else. Or it sounds like something made up in a chemistry lab. It has this mysterious connotation.

The translation I like best is "kinds of stuff." These are the five kinds of stuff that make us up. I think it goes better with the Pali because khandha is a simple word that just means heap or bundle. It's just kinds of stuff that get collected. You could talk about a khandha of sticks if you're gathering twigs for firewood.

So there are these five kinds of stuff that make us up: material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. I want to talk about each of these individually.

Material form—sometimes I'll just call it form. Sometimes the translations just use the word form. The Pali term is rūpa. What it means here is the whole physical world. Everything you can touch, everything you can see is all in the realm of form. The trees, the earth, the clouds, the rain, the water—it's all under the world of form.

Form also refers to the experiences of the five physical senses. It includes smells and tastes and touches as well as sights and sounds. So that's all the world of form—the whole physical world and the physical senses. It's a big part of our reality. For instance, when you hear the bell, that sound is in the aggregate of form, in the first aggregate.

Since this takes care of the whole world of matter, you might infer that the other four aggregates have to do with mind. And that's right. The first aggregate is matter; the other four have to do with mind.

The second one is feeling tone—our old friend vedanā. Sometimes we'll just say feeling to be brief, but be clear that it's this vedanā quality of feeling tone, not feeling as in emotion.

We've talked extensively about how central vedana is to the teachings and to our practice. Vedana is the second foundation of mindfulness and a central link in the chain of dependent origination. Here it's singled out as one of five aggregates that make us up, giving it a truly central role in the Buddha's teachings.

Why is that? I think we've explored this because the pleasant form of vedana tends to lead us into greed. The unpleasant form tends to lead us into aversion. And the neutral form tends to lead us into delusion. You might say that feeling tone tends to stimulate the kilesas in our response to them. Since the kilesas are where we get involved with suffering, feeling tone becomes a critical link in the unmindful response to experience that leads to suffering.

With the bell, most of us experience that as a pleasant feeling tone. The sound itself is nice, but even more, this is the sound of the end of a meditation period. That's like one of the best things that happens in a day, so we generally have really pleasant associations. But it might happen that this becomes an unpleasant association. You're in the middle of the best meditation you've ever had in your life and the bell rings. Then you know that all these people are going to get up and stampede out of the hall and you're going to lose your concentration. What a bummer.

But generally, it's experienced as a pleasant thing. Again, remember that the pleasant or unpleasant quality is not intrinsic to the object. It's how it lands in our own mind, personally. That's determined by our conditioning, our background, our tendencies, our current state of mind.

Sometimes you've probably had the experience where a physical sensation is felt as unpleasant. But sometimes even in the same sitting, as concentration deepens and the mind becomes steady, that sensation becomes neutral. Or going through the lunch line, I can tell some people really like beets. I don't like beets. They taste a little too much like earth to me. But a lot of people really like beets. So it's very personal, this feeling tone thing.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, in describing it, says something like: we feel into the experience, and the feeling tone comes out of that. It's our mind meeting the experience—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is the second aggregate.

The third aggregate is perception. In Pali, the term is sanna. Annie gave a whole talk on this, so I think this is already in your understanding. I just want to say a few other things about it.

Perception in Buddhist language means recognition. I think in Western psychological terms, it more often means the bare sense data. But we use contact for that. So perception comes after contact and recognizes what's just been experienced. When you hear that sound, you recognize "bell." You recognize "meditation bell." That's perception.

If your eyes are open and you're looking around the room, you're perceiving many different things automatically. You perceive people and floor and shawls and windows and lights and Buddha images. All these just happen automatically as you look around.

In fact, the bare sense data of the eye is not people, shawls, windows, lamps, Buddhas. The bare sense data is just form and color. But we've learned to recognize them as all these different things. It's a learned response.

Now when we perceive something and put it in a category, sometimes that blocks us from taking a closer look at the thing. You might label something in the sensation in your leg as pain, and that just makes you draw back and not want to get closer to it. But if you get close to it with mindfulness and see its changing nature, its impermanent nature, it reveals a lot more about it than just that simple category or label of pain.

Or take this thing. Now you've learned to see it as a bell.

But if it was in another setting and you came upon it, you might not know what it is, or you might think it's a bowl for a monastic. Our monastics have very modest bowls, but I had a friend in Thailand who was a monk whose bowl was about this size. When I went on alms round with him, he filled it to the brim and almost overflowing, then fed many people back at the monastery.

So we could look a little closer and see it could be a bowl. It could be a planter—we could grow a nice flower out of this thing. You don't want to be too quick to stop with perception. You want to go into the experience and see what's really there.

Zen plays with this a lot. In those stories, the Zen master holds something up and says, "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. What is it?" What I got from that is that if I went to Zen, I was going to get hit a lot. One reason I came to Vipassana.

This is the koan practice, and there's a funny story about this. Some friends were living in Cambridge in the 70s when two highly respected spiritual masters both came to town at the same time. There was Kalu Rinpoche, a very high Lama in the Tibetan Kagyu lineage, and Seungsahn, who was a widely respected master in the Korean Zen tradition. They thought, "Let's introduce them to each other."

In Asia, these traditions do not mingle. I bet many of you have mingled with other traditions—I have. But

in Asia, that just doesn't happen. The Zen people stay away from the Tibetans, the Tibetans stay away from the Theravadans. So this was a great opportunity to bring together these two really awakened mind streams and let them meet each other. Who knows what will happen? It will be like emptiness meeting emptiness. Maybe we'll get enlightened from the dialogue.

They brought them to a friend's home and served tea and snacks. At a certain point, Seungsahn took the initiative and started a conversation. In typical Zen style, he picked up an orange, held it out to Kalu Rinpoche and said, "What is this?" Kalu just sat there doing his mala and smiling, unruffled. Seungsahn wasn't getting the response he wanted, so he held it out again and said, "What is this?"

Finally, Kalu leaned over and whispered something to his translator. The translator then said, "What he said was, 'Don't they have oranges in Korea?'" This was the meeting of the awakened minds. I don't think it deepened from there.

So this is the activity of perception. Here we recognize the sound as the bell, recognize it as the ending of a meditation period.

The fourth aggregate is the field called mental formations. The Pali term is saṅkhāra, and this refers to basically the whole range of mental activity—thoughts, emotions, moods, any state of mind, meditative states, the refined states. We've talked about this area a lot. All of this goes into the fourth aggregate, which is mental formations. It's also a very, very big field. Beautiful emotions, difficult emotions, refined meditative states—they're all in this category of mental formations.

It's basically all the mental activity except that feeling and perception have already been taken out and singled out as unique aggregates. For a long time, I found this list really puzzling. Why would these two be taken out of mental activity and highlighted? Partly it speaks to the importance that they have in our psychological process and in our Dharma understanding. And also it could be a little arbitrary. Why not move volition out from mental activity and isolate that? Volition is the heart of karma.

It's really important. Why not move attention out? Attention is either wise or unwise, lands on things, dwells, abides. It's a really important factor too. So I don't know why the Buddha took these two out and highlighted them, but he did.

If we wanted to be a little more simplistic, we could take feeling and perception and put them back in the whole basket of sankharas, of mental activity. Then we'd have three aggregates: form, which is the physical world including the body; mental formations or mental activity; and the next aggregate—consciousness. We'll come back to this threefold list a little later. Actually, this is the way the Abhidhamma divides up our experience, putting things into three categories rather than five.

In sankharas, we hear the bell, and I don't know about you, but when I hear the bell ending the meditation session, I relax. I start feeling a sense of ease in my mind and body, and sometimes I think, "Oh, now I could sit for a long time." That sense of ease and the thought "now I can sit a long time"—those are parts of

sankhara, mental formations, mental activity.

The next aggregate is really interesting: consciousness. The Pali term is vijñāna. In Western language, sometimes consciousness has really broad meanings. I once applied for a PhD program in California called The History of Consciousness. I thought that would be really fascinating. That's a really broad use of the term. Or we could talk about cosmic consciousness or consciousness raising—all those words in Western philosophy or psychology.

The Buddha's use of the word consciousness is really simple, very basic. It's just the knowing of sense data, of sense objects or sense experience. There are six types of consciousness: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness. It's just the bare knowing of a sense object—the knowing of a sight, the knowing of a sound, the knowing of a smell or a touch or a thought or an emotion, in the simplest way possible.

For instance, when you hear the bell—just that knowing is the activity of consciousness. Then other things happen in the mind in relation to it. You recognize, you perceive, "That's a bell." If you have perfect pitch, you might know, "Oh, that's C-sharp, just above middle C." If you're conceptualizing, you might think, "That's the sound of a Japanese bell that is used strictly in Buddhist temples and monasteries." You can conceptualize a lot beyond that, but the basic ear consciousness just hears, just reveals that sound. It brings that into our experience.

We're all conscious beings. What that means is we're having experiences at our sense doors all the time we're awake. It's consciousness that brings them into our field of experience. This is what it means to be a sentient being—we're having conscious experiences.

This flow of conscious experience seems to turn off when we go into deep sleep, if we faint, if we go under anesthesia. I don't have recollection of conscious experience in any of those states. Maybe there's something going on, but it's not what I know. So that gives a sense of what consciousness does—it brings experience to us at our sense doors.

It's the faculty of all sentient beings. It's not just humans that have this. Every creature has this. Frogs have it. Birds have it. As one Zen master said, all wriggling things have this kind of consciousness. But it's the simplest kind of knowing possible, before perception, before conceptual elaboration.

Now what's interesting is that for us to have an experience of that sound, there has to be both the sound and the consciousness. Just like for us to have an experience of breathing, we have to be conscious of the breath and there has to be a physical movement.

If we had a corpse, you could push down on its chest and some air would come out of its lungs. You could let up on its chest, and some air would probably go back into its lungs, and that seems like a breath. But as far as we know, the corpse is not having a conscious experience of breathing. We're having conscious experience of breathing.

So you can start to tune into that. You're knowing your breath, you're knowing the sounds, you're knowing the sights. When a sound arises, the way it's understood is that the sound and the knowing of it, the consciousness of it, are there together. It's one experience, but it's got these two aspects. And you can tune into either one. You can tune into the physical form aspect of the sound, or you can start to tune into your knowing of it.

Now, we don't usually give this meditation instruction, even through choiceless attention. But in the three-month course, we like to get you to turn your attention in this direction and look at that knowing quality itself. It takes a little while to tune into it. It's not obvious. But the first thing that you might have to inquire into is: how can one experience, the sound, have two aspects?

So let me ask, is this black or is it round? It's one thing, but it has two aspects, doesn't it? And you can tune into either one you want. You can focus on the blackness or you can focus on the roundness. So it's the same thing with hearing, or with any sense door. You can focus on the object, which is what we've mostly been doing, or you can start to tune in to the consciousness itself, to the knowing, because they're both there.

That's all I want to say about that meditation for now, but a little later in the retreat, we'll do something that brings that out a bit more.

So consciousness is with all the aggregates. It was with the knowing of the sound. It was with the knowing of the vedanā as pleasant. It was with the perception of this as a bell. It was with the feeling of ease. And it was with the thought. All those are arising in consciousness. So consciousness is there with every other aggregate.

A question that I'm going to leave you to reflect on is: is there anything in your field of experience that doesn't fit into one of these categories? Or is this list of the aggregates exhaustive in describing your experience? We're not going to go into that further. I'm going to leave you with that question, but I'm going to suggest maybe it is.

And if it is, then this gets pretty interesting. Because what it says is there's only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. And there's one big term in our vocabulary that isn't there: I, me, self. Not in there. Not necessary.

So there's no I that owns the aggregates. There's no I that's the center of everything. There's no I that's observing all the sense experiences from the place behind the eyes. In fact, that sense of an observer is only a laying claim to the activity of consciousness. It's consciousness that sees and hears and thinks and feels. No I.

So this is kind of amazing—that if we look closely at our mind-body process, we can't find an I within it. And these categories of the aggregates describe our experience completely. It means there's no need to bring in anything like a self or an I.

And yet the self seems to emerge over and over and over again, doesn't it? How does that happen? How does that come about? One way we can see it is that when we lose mindfulness in the present moment and we drift into thinking and papañca—I think Annie talked about this—papañca tends to run around I, me and mine. All our thoughts tend to be around I, me, and mine because that's where the charge is.

That's where the energy is. That's where the passions are. That's where the emotional investment has been. So especially compulsive thoughts tend to be fueled by I, me, mine, and our self-concerns. And yet as we understand it more and more, we start to let go more and more of this sense of self.

What the aggregates say is that the human being is just a collection of parts. And these parts, as you'll see, are to some degree impersonal. We all kind of have them. And it's a little bit like—if you can see what this object is from the back of the room, you can probably see it's a pen. It's a ballpoint pen. And of course, a ballpoint pen can be taken apart. And we see that when you take a ballpoint pen apart, there are these components. There's an ink cartridge and a spring and a barrel and a top. And right now that we've taken it apart, is it a pen? I wouldn't call this a pen. It has a potential to be a pen, but only when the parts are put together in a certain way and assembled—then it can again function as a pen.

So a human being is a collection of parts in the same way. And that's what the Buddha is inviting us to realize. And when they're put together in this particular way, it's called a human being.

So what this opened the door for me around was my sister's death. Because when I saw her as solid, it was because in my mind I had fused her personality—which is her sankaras. Personality and sankaras are covering the same territory. It was her mental formations, her way of being in the world, her sense of humor, her personal qualities, her big laugh. All these things were what I had come to know as my sister, joined with her body. So in my mind, I'd fused them. Personality and body were one.

And what I saw at her death is that the personality fell away. The sankaras were separated at death, and the body was there, and the sankaras weren't anymore. That made it a lot more understandable for me, a lot more relatable. And I saw the same thing's going to happen for me. When I die, this personality isn't going to be anymore. The body will still be here for a while, but this personality will go. In fact, personality is not a fixed thing. It kind of comes and goes and rises and falls and appears and disappears moment by moment by moment. So that's helpful to see too. Personality is impermanent. And it's not owned by anyone. I'm just manifesting with all these thoughts and emotions.

So that's one way that we create the sense of I. We think about things that we are invested in, emotionally invested in. We conceptualize things being put together in a certain way. But there's maybe a more immediate way that the sense of self, the sense of I, gets generated again and again.

So the first thing I want to mention: the sense of I is not stable. The sense of I goes through a lot of ups and downs during a typical day. Sometimes it will feel really strong. And this is usually when hindrances have been stirred up and we've gotten concerned about some sequence of events. Could be something that

happened at breakfast. Could be something that happened five years ago. And we start to proliferate around what was done to me or what I wanted to do or how it didn't work out well or how it's going to work out better in the future for me. So all those activities go on when the sense of self is strong.

But at other times, when there's quite a bit of calm in the mind and body, the sense of I really goes kind of quiet, goes a little bit dark. And there's not a lot of I-ing and my-ing taking place. So start to notice that during the day, the sense of the power of self can fluctuate wildly—sometimes very dramatic and big and expressive, sometimes very soft, thin, relaxed, sometimes hardly there. So notice that.

So how is it that it gets built up? Again, this is from Ananda. He related this story much later in his life.

He said, when I was newly ordained, another monk told me, "It is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging."

This is profound. The notion "I am" comes when we take hold of something, not without clinging. This is why the sense of self gets so quiet in times of calm and peace—because we're not clinging. But once something comes along that stirs us up—a memory, an anticipation, a strong physical sensation, a difficult emotion—we take hold of it. And in that taking hold of it, we energize the thoughts of "I." We create a self around it.

You can watch this in your experience. When something strong comes along, see how you relate to it and see if the thoughts of "I" don't start to spring up. And of course, this is what engages us into suffering.

So basically the sense of "I" arises out of clinging. And then Ananda continues: "By clinging to what does 'I am' arise? By clinging to form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness." By clinging to any of the five aggregates, then the sense of "I" comes into existence when it wasn't necessarily strongly there before.

So when we grasp a phenomenon at any sense door, the sense of "I" starts to come in, and you can watch this happen. Take a look when there's a pain in the body somewhere. See if the word "I" arises with it. "Oh, now I have a pain. Now I don't feel very good." Or a meditation's going well. "Now I'm having a good meditation. Now my concentration is back." Again, the words "I" and "my" come in.

Does the word "I" ever arise on its own? Does it ever just pop up and go, "I"? It doesn't, does it? Doesn't it always arise in relation to something else? So it's by taking hold of something else and then we put an "I" or "my" around it. You can watch the birth of this "I" over and over and over again.

So what we basically do is we call this "selfing." Selfing comes out of grasping. Anytime there's grasping, there's going to be the arising of self. So as far as I'm concerned, grasping and selfing are synonymous. Same dynamic is being pointed to.

And you can take a look. See when the thoughts of "I" and "my" come. The "I" is always extra. We don't have to say "I have a pain." We can just say "pain." We don't have to say "I'm feeling upset." We can just

note "upset" or "agitated." This is the beauty of mindfulness practice. Mindfulness practice sees what's there without adding "I" or "my." And the noting practice really clarifies this.

And then how does it feel when the sense of "I" isn't strong? What's that like? Well, it means we're not strongly grasping at that time. So how does it feel to not strongly grasp? It means in a way we've let go.

Ajahn Chah had this really lovely line. He said, "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. If you let go completely, there's complete peace." See what happens when you let go of clinging. How does that feel in mind and body?

So one of the ways that we see the impersonal nature of the aggregates—we'll go back to that simpler expression of body, mind states, and consciousness—sort of three aggregates.

You can see all of these not as yours, not as very personal. You can see them as expressions of nature.

This body came about because our father's sperm met our mother's egg. They united. They multiplied. We popped out into the world, were nourished on milk and water and air and sun and food, and we grew and grew and grew, and then here we are.

Did you have anything to do with the basic way your body turned out? How tall you are, color of your hair, color of your eyes, color of your skin? Did you choose all those? It's just nature. It's physical nature simply doing its thing according to physical laws. And yet we take a lot of ownership, don't we, of the body.

My teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, put it this way: This body came out of nature. It's part of nature. It never departed from nature. And it belongs to nature. Give it back to nature. That will be a big relief for you.

So the body is just physical nature.

What about emotions? Do you have an emotion that nobody else in the world has? Or do you have every emotion that all of us have? We all have the same emotions, don't we? We all know happiness and sadness and love and anger and all of them. So this is not personal nature either. The stories around them are, but the emotions themselves are not. I call this human nature.

And then there's the element of consciousness. Consciousness is the thing that is most alike in all of us. I don't think that one of us really has a grand consciousness and the rest of us have puny consciousness. We just all have this facility for knowing sense objects. Seems just the same to me. So this is sentient nature.

Physical nature, human nature, sentient nature. This is what makes us up. It's all nature.

When we can see it that way and not take pride and ownership and overlay it with "I" and "mine," it's very freeing. There's such a relief because we see there are bigger forces in the world than we normally acknowledge that are creating our life, creating our experience.

I'm going to close with one quotation, a little story. There was a practitioner at the time of the Buddha named Bahiya who lived in southern India. He wasn't sure if he was enlightened or not, which could have been a clue. Nonetheless, a heavenly being did him the favor and came down, read his mind and said, "No, Bahiya, you're not enlightened."

But he was a quite pure being. He had devotees and lived very simply, with strong renunciation in his life. And so this deva said, "Not only are you not enlightened, you're not even on the path to being enlightened."

And Bahiya said, "Is there an awakened one in the world today?"

And the deva said, "Yes, there is. He's now living in the town of Savatthi in northern India. And you can meet him."

So Bahiya picked up and left and walked hundreds of miles to find this awakened one, this Buddha. He came upon the Buddha while the Buddha was on alms round and said, "Please, sir, I've heard that you're a wonderful teacher. Please give me your teachings in brief."

And the Buddha said, "This is not an appropriate time because I'm on my alms round."

But Bahiya persisted and asked twice more, saying, "Please give me your teachings. Who knows what will happen? The future is uncertain."

You may not live. I may not live. Please give me your teachings.

So the Buddha gave him the teaching. And this is what he said:

"This is how you should train, Bahiya. 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 the sensed. In what is cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then, Bahiya, you will not be in that. When you are not in that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, then you are neither here, nor there, nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

And on hearing this, Bahiya fully awakened.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

When you are not in that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, then you are neither here, nor there, nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

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