Patterns of Becoming 2: The Five Aggregates

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:49

The talk tonight is on patterns of becoming two, the five aggregates. This is the second in a series of talks on this theme of how we generate the sense of self based on changing impermanent aspects of our experience and how that happens in familiar and continuing patterns of becoming.

Last time we talked about this process based on the factor of perception and the proliferation based on what we perceive or papañca. Tonight we're going to talk about it from the point of view of the five aggregates. And next week I'll talk about it based on dependent origination and also put more emphasis on the release factor, how we get free from these cycles.

But in all three of the talks, the basic theme is the concept that the self is not a steady, intrinsic, ongoing part of our experience, but is rather something that we generate over and over again by our own volitional actions. So tonight we're going to look at another way that that generation happens.

And this formation of self isn't a trivial thing. It's the root of our bondage. It's the root of the misunderstanding, the root of ignorance with which we approach existence. I want to take a kind of big view for a moment and say that it is based on our coming into existence as an individual embodied being in life. And it's this individual embodiment that is partly responsible for the sense of separation that we mistakenly take to be ultimate or absolute in some way, but isn't truly an ultimate or absolute separation from other beings or from nature. But we mistakenly take this individuality to be confirmation of a separate ongoing self.

Now in modern Western culture, this taking birth is supposed to be a thing of great celebration. Oh, you're so lucky to have been born and life is so wonderful and it's all to be celebrated. But from a Buddhist perspective, this taking birth is a little bit problematic because taking birth also involves us in aging, illness, and death. Not only that, but this individual separateness, seeming separateness, also leads us to a sense of isolation, loneliness, and then fear. We feel cut off from the root of our being, which is nature in its many aspects, both physical and mental.

So again, the biggest picture we might reflect on is how this came to be. Rumi has a nice little poem that points to this when he says, "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." I really like his honesty. This is our situation when we wander into the spiritual path. We don't really know what this life is supposed to be for or about. We may still not.

So I love this pointing because there's this deep mystery at the root of our individual existence. How did this come to be? How do we find ourselves in this world of so much beauty and so much suffering, with a

quality of intelligence and compassion and capacity for wisdom with all these other beings? It's extraordinary.

When I was sitting my first three-month course, a friend of mine, somebody I got to know on the retreat, came up to Joseph Goldstein, who was teaching the course, in quite a state of urgency. She grabbed Joseph in the hallway and took him by the arm and said, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean here on this retreat or here at all?" And she said, "Here at all. Why are we here at all?" And Joseph said, "Because you wanted to see and smell and taste and touch and hear."

That's an interesting comment, isn't it? The Buddhist understanding is basically that we were drawn back into birth by sense desire, by wanting to experience what could be experienced through the five senses. But then that's what gets us in all this situation involving birth, aging, illness, death, and all the complications of living.

Nisargadatta Maharaj was a great teacher in India. He lived in Bombay and died in the early 90s, who wrote a book about his teachings called *I Am That*, which for my taste is second only to the Buddha's teachings for depth and power and beauty. And Maharaj put it this way: "The desire for embodied existence is the root cause of trouble." So this wanting to experience the things of the senses is what involves us in all the difficulty of life. And this is the cycle of samsara, wanting again and again and again to have this kind of sense contact.

And again from Maharaj, "All yogas have only one aim, and that is to save you from the calamity of separate existence." So that's also the purpose of the Buddhist teachings. So maybe the way to be saved is to question this sense of separation, this sense that we are actually an isolated self going through this journey.

So we can take a closer look at the creation of this sense of I. Really, for all of us, before we encounter the Dharma, the I is the center of the universe. Even after we encounter the Dharma, for a long time, the I is the center of the universe. Everything revolves around this me, and it seems so self-evident, but have you ever been able to locate it? Have you ever been able to locate this self, this thing called I? Where is its hiding place? Where is it found?

The philosopher William James put it this way: "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat."

The Dalai Lama offers us profound guidance here: when we are certain that something exists but cannot actually find it, this is a sure sign of delusion—evidence that we aren't understanding correctly. The classical analogy illustrates this perfectly: imagine walking along a path in the woods, seeing something lying on the ground and being absolutely certain it's a snake. You jump back in fright, but when you look more closely, you discover it's merely a piece of colored rope twisted together.

This is exactly our usual habit with the self—we see it and think it's a snake. But the purpose of yoga and

dharma practice is to investigate carefully. When we finally see things as they truly are, there's no more fear. This is the understanding the Buddha spoke about.

Part of this confusion around "I" is created by our very language, and we can easily observe this confusion through some of our habitual ways of talking and thinking. Let me ask you a few questions to illustrate this.

First: How tall are you?

This isn't a difficult question. I would say I'm 5'10". When I say "I'm 5'10"," I say it without thinking twice—it's automatic. Whether you're 6 feet or 5'4", whatever it may be. Here we are equating the "I" with the body. The body is 5'10", so we're saying "I am the body, and I am 5 feet 10 inches tall."

Now let me ask another question: What color are your eyes?

Easy question. I'd say my eyes are brown. But here you are suddenly not the body—you're not the eyes. You're the owner of the eyes. "These are my eyes." So are you the body, or are you the owner of it, somehow separate from it? You can't really be both, can you? Not logically.

What if we look at the mind in the same way? Sometimes we say "I'm happy" or "I'm sad," equating ourselves with the feeling—"I am happy, I am sad." Other times we talk about "my joys and my sorrows." So again, are we the emotion, or are we the owner of the emotion?

These are contradictory ways we use "I." But perhaps the most persistent way we feel the "I" is imagining it's somehow located right behind the eyes in the center of the head, always looking out on the world. We imagine it's what receives all the impressions of sight and sound and smell and taste and touch—some kind of observer back there that's really receiving everything and pulling all the levers, like a command and control center.

Not there either.

All these ways of thinking are incorrect. The Buddha put it quite straightforwardly: there is no self to be found. One of my teachers put it even more bluntly: "You are not there."

These ways we imagine the self to be cannot be verified empirically. They're simply not true. You cannot find such a self within the mind-body system.

But let's go a little further. Let's examine this formation of self more closely.

When we look around this room and see all the people here, as we look, we normally think: "that's a person, that's a person, that's a person." In the Visuddhimagga, one of the ancient commentarial texts from the 6th century, they say that someone who looks and sees "a person" hasn't studied the situation very closely.

They offer this analogy: if you're a skilled butcher carving up cattle to sell pieces of meat, as you're cutting, you don't think "cow, cow, cow." You think "rump, sirloin, tenderloin, ribs," and so forth.

In the same way, someone who has closely examined human experience doesn't simply say "person." They've looked much more precisely than that and have developed more accurate categories.

So when the Buddha looked, I don't think he saw "person." I think he saw in a much more refined way—examining the whole field of human experience and asking: What actually constitutes a human being?

So it's mind and body and all the experience. One way is the six senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and the objects of mind. That's one way that he often used to describe human experiences. He used it again and again and again. It maps very nicely onto our meditation practice. A lot of the instructions follow this schema of the six senses, and it's a complete description of human experience. Everything that happens fits within it.

The Buddha employed this device mainly to cut through cravings. He talked about how pleasant experience arises at the six sense doors and how we want it to be a certain way and don't want it to be another way. So the six sense model is used to cut through craving.

But the other way that he described again and again our human experience was the five aggregates. And this model he used to cut through wrong view. The formation of self, the belief in self, is wrong view. The best way in the Buddhist description to undo that is the five aggregates. So that's what we're going to explore tonight—how self gets generated around the five aggregates and how to loosen that identification.

Just as we learn to see ourselves and others through this map of the five aggregates, we learn to see the way the Buddha saw. And we learn to see without the false sense of I or self. And that's the power of it. We align ourselves with right view and that uproots wrong view in the mind.

Some people have told me they find this theme kind of intellectual and not very interesting. For that reason, it seems a little too abstract. And I just want to say that the time that this schema came alive for me was after the death of one of my older sisters. It was about fifteen years ago now. She was five years older than me, and she died when she was reasonably young in her early fifties. And she died quite suddenly. She'd been relatively healthy. She had a long-term illness, but she was quite healthy up until actually the day of her death. So it came as a shock to all of us, and I'd been on the phone with her just a week before, and she was very alive and vital.

My sister was a strong personality. I loved her. I was close to her. Very energetic presence in her family and our family, and a delightful person. And when she died, I really had a hard time understanding how someone who had been so solid a week before could just not be there anymore. And I went through a period of grief that lasted a couple of months and darkness and depression and so on.

And then as I was in that and starting to come out of it, I really had an urgency to understand what death meant or what is dying. What happens when a human being dies? And the way that I came to understand it that made the most sense was through the five aggregates. And so it helped me really come to terms with what is living here and in death, what goes? And how do they get—how does what leaves get separated from what remains? It's so mysterious.

The five aggregates will be the topic. The word in Pali is khandha, the five khandha. In Pali, it just means heap or bundle. The Sanskrit word is skandha. You might hear it referred to by either of those terms. And it's just a common, ordinary term in the day. So it could be thought of as the five heaps that make us up, the five bundles that make us up. Aggregate sounds a little too technical to me, like we're on some road-building exercise and there's asphalt and gravel and all that. I'm not so fond of it, but it's the common usage.

The translation, though, that I like best is kinds of stuff. So these are just the five kinds of stuff that make up you and me. And I don't think any of it is too hard to come to terms with.

So the five kinds of stuff that make us up are material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Some of these we've talked quite a lot about already, so I'll touch on them briefly, but I want to go into each of these five.

So the first one is material form, or usually tonight I'll just say form, but it means matter. So the Pali word is rūpa.

But most drug dealers, it turned out, did not like Montovani. They found it deeply unpleasant. So when the Montovani music came on, they would scatter just as effectively as when the police showed up. The store manager never had to call the police again—he just turned on the Montovani.

This illustrates perfectly how feeling tone is not inherent in the object itself, but arises from the interaction between consciousness and form. The same music that might evoke pleasant feelings in some people creates strong aversion in others. This is why feeling tone, or vedanā, is classified as a mental aggregate rather than part of the material form.

The third aggregate is perception, or saññā in Pali. This is the mind's capacity to recognize and identify what it encounters. When you hear that bell, perception recognizes it as a bell sound rather than, say, a car horn or someone's voice. When you see the Buddha statue behind me, perception identifies it as a Buddha image rather than a tree or a person.

Perception involves pattern recognition. It takes the raw data coming through our sense doors and organizes it into recognizable categories. This happens almost instantaneously and usually below the threshold of conscious awareness. We don't usually notice the moment of recognition; we simply experience already knowing what something is.

But perception can be quite conditioned and variable. What one person perceives as beautiful art, another might perceive as ugly decoration. What one culture perceives as food, another culture might perceive as inedible. Our past experiences, cultural conditioning, and personal associations all shape how we perceive and categorize our experience.

The fourth aggregate is mental formations, or saṅkhāra in Pali. This is perhaps the most complex of the aggregates because it includes all the mental factors that arise along with consciousness—things like attention, concentration, mindfulness, compassion, anger, joy, doubt, and countless others.

These formations are the various ways our minds respond to and shape our experience. They include both wholesome mental factors like loving-kindness and generosity, and unwholesome ones like greed and hatred. They also include neutral factors like attention and memory that can serve either wholesome or unwholesome purposes.

You might think of mental formations as the mind's toolkit—all the different ways consciousness can configure itself to meet whatever arises in experience. Some of these formations arise habitually and automatically, while others require cultivation and training.

The slightly sentimental and swelling orchestral sound drove the dealers away. They would clear out of the parking lot and go somewhere else because it apparently drove them crazy. So I experienced Mantovani as pleasant, but they experienced it as very annoying and interfering. We have different responses based on our conditioning—it depends on how we feel into the experience.

Sayadaw Tejaniya talks about this in a helpful way. He says feeling is like a verb, an active engagement of our mind with sense experience that gives it a certain quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. But this quality isn't intrinsic to the thing itself, which is why feeling tone, or vedanā, is a mental quality rather than physical.

The third aggregate, the second aspect of mental activity, is perception. The Pali word is saññā. We discussed this in the first talk as the basis from which proliferation happens, and perception operates continuously. As we look around this room, we categorize the sights into recognizable things—people, chairs, cushions, walls, lamps. Some of these categorizations carry rich associations, like when we see a friend or partner or someone we know, while others remain fairly neutral without much emotional charge.

What's fascinating is that perception is a learned activity. The raw data of sight consists simply of patches of color—form, color, and movement. You can glimpse this more clearly if you cover one eye. When you remove depth perception, you can see more distinctly that there are just patches without intrinsic organization, but we learn to organize them into meaningful wholes.

This became vividly clear in a story Oliver Sacks tells about a patient who had been blind since very early childhood—he had some sight as a very young child but then lost it until midlife. An eye surgeon believed

they could perform an operation to restore this man's sight, and Sacks was consulting as a neurosurgeon throughout the process.

The momentous day arrived. The surgery had gone well. The patient was still in his hospital bed with eyes wrapped in white bandages, about to have them removed. The surgeon, family members, and Sacks were all present. Everyone expected that with this unveiling there would be a miraculous moment of "Wow, I can see!"

They removed the bandage. There was just silence and a somewhat confused, puzzled expression on the patient's face. The doctor asked, "Can you see?"

Later, the patient described his experience. He said, "When the bandages were taken off, the whole world was just a jumble of form and color and movements and blur. I didn't know what anything was. But when I heard the voice asking 'Can you see?' I recognized it as my surgeon's voice. So I assumed that blob drifting toward my eyes was his face. But other than that, I didn't know what anything was."

He had to completely relearn the process of perception. Those neural pathways hadn't developed properly or had been lost because his sight loss had occurred so long ago. He never became very skilled at perceiving. He achieved some basic functionality in the world, but it never became second nature. He was never able to quickly reestablish that faculty of perception.

Carol mentioned last night how perception can mislead us when we don't see accurately. The Buddha identified ways we perceive permanence when the truth is impermanence, or happiness where the reality is suffering.

Perception can also limit our seeing to mere concepts when there's richer reality beneath. For example, you're sitting in meditation and feel some discomfort in your knee, which you label as "pain." This may be an accurate perception of the feeling around that sensation—it can indeed be experienced as painful. But sometimes when we use the word "pain," we stop at the label and forget to investigate the actual experience. These conceptual labels can block us from seeing more deeply and intimately into the true nature of our experience.

Much of Zen practice revolves around how we perceive. Consider this bell: if you encountered it somewhere in the world without context, would you know it was a bell? Might you think it could be a planter? A very large monk's begging bowl? If you turned it upside down, could you put it on a statue as a hat?

All those things could happen, couldn't they?

In Zen, the koan is often something like, "What is this?" If you say it is a striker, I will hit you. If you tell me it's not a striker, I will also hit you. Quick, what is this?

What I got from those stories was that if I sat Zen, I was going to get hit a lot. And that's one reason I ended

up in Vipassana.

So in Zen, they like to do these duels about perception and can you see the thing in itself and not label it. There's a story about this.

Back in the 70s, we were all coming out of the hippie era and discovering the wonders of Eastern religions and mysticism. Great masters were starting to come to this country for the first time in a long time.

Some meditation students in Boston discovered that two great masters from different traditions were in town at the same time. They got them together at the house of some friends who told us this story later. I wasn't there, but I heard the story.

One of the masters was the Korean monk Sansanim, a Korean Zen teacher. The other master was Kalu Rinpoche, a very warm, beautiful, wise old monk in the Tibetan tradition.

So they brought them together in a living room, offered them tea, and hoped that they'd recognize each other's enlightenment and there would be these great sparks of wisdom from their meeting and recognition.

It didn't quite go like that.

First there was the language problem. So they had translators. They both had good translators. But then it turns out there's this thing about spiritual traditions—they see things a certain way or expect things to be a certain way.

So they sat down and had a little chit-chat. Then Sansanim went into his Zen thing, which is he picked up an orange and held it out toward Kalu Rinpoche and very intently said, "What is this?"

Kalu Rinpoche just sat there doing his beads, doing some mantra, very peaceful, totally undisturbed, just reflecting.

Sansanim thought, "He's not quick enough." He held out the orange again: "What is this?" Waiting for the answer of the koan.

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

This perception can be a lot of fun to play with, to see when we get it right and when we miss it.

So when we hear that rupa has pleasant feeling tone, we recognize it as, oh, that's the bell. That sound is the bell. And we know, moreover, that's the bell that ends the sitting. So we're free to get up and walk.

The fourth aggregate is called mental formations. The Pali word is sankhara. This is really a very broad and very important category because it includes all our emotions, thoughts, meditative states of mind, wholesome factors that develop in practice—like the factors of enlightenment, the five spiritual faculties,

the Brahmaviharas—as well as the difficult afflictive emotions of fear and anger and greed and jealousy and so on. All of these are in the category of mental formations.

We talked last time about how these basic movements of greed and aversion stem from an attempt—we're trying to accomplish some kind of security for ourselves through these movements of greed and aversion and the covering over with delusion.

These are also sometimes called volitional formations, which means that there's some motivated energy behind them. We'll talk more about this when we get to karma, but volition forms the essence of karma. Karma is action with a volition, and this category has a strong volitional component. These mind states are expressing some kind of intention or volition.

When we first tune into how often greed, aversion, and delusion color our motivations, we often get this question: is there anything that's not coming out of greed, aversion, and delusion? Because they seem so central.

But there are. There are beautiful motivations of kindness and generosity and non-harming and restraint.

Now, a lot of these ways that we feel are repetitive and conditioned and form patterns in our life and in our mind. I want to come back and pick that up after we've explored the selfing a little bit. But I'll just make a note of it now and we'll come back.

So... some minutes into a sit, we hear the sound of the bell. Feeling tone is pleasant. Perception is "bell" and "sitting." Then some formations come. Often we think at this time, "Oh, now I could sit forever."

I feel so good. I could sit forever. And there's often a real wave of relief at that point. So these are the formations that attend the bell.

The last aggregate is consciousness. The Pali word is *vijñāna*. We've talked about this a little bit and we'll explore it more in other talks. Consciousness is just that capacity of mind that you could say receives all the sense data. When we're seeing, we're conscious of a sight. When we're hearing, we're conscious of a sound. When we're smelling, we're conscious of a smell, and so on. When we feel an emotion, we're conscious of that feeling. It doesn't add anything to it. It's just the factor of mind that is revealing experience to us—you could say receiving it or holding it, however you like to think of it.

Every moment that we're awake, we're having conscious experience of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and feelings. This is just the very bare knowing of the thing before feeling happens, before perception happens. Just the datum, like "white square," which we interpret as walls. It's the consciousness in us that gives that experience anytime we're awake.

As we watch the bell ripple through all these other aggregates, it's consciousness that knows it at every step. Consciousness knows the form, consciousness knows the feeling, consciousness knows the perception, and consciousness knows those formations of relaxation and relief and thought.

So these are the five aggregates. An interesting thing about this list is that they're all present in every moment of experience. The six sense doors may be there or may not be there. You can't always analyze smell, for instance, because sometimes we're not smelling anything. Sometimes we're not really tasting anything. But the aggregates are there in every experience, so we can investigate them and relate to them at any point. We can start to investigate our experience through this map.

An interesting question to ask is: is it an exhaustive map? That is, can every part of our experience fit into one of these five categories or groupings? I'll leave that with you to explore, but I want to suggest that it can. The five aggregates cover our whole range of experience as human beings in the realm of the senses. Every sense experience can be included in here.

But there's a fairly central concept that isn't here. And that is the I. There is no mention of an I or a self anywhere in this list. And yet we're saying maybe it includes all the aspects of human experience. So this is the reason that it can be so helpful to look in this way. We start to understand our experience independent of this notion of I.

There's no center where all these things are landing. There's no being behind the eyes that's receiving all these. In any moment, there's just form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness happening. All of these are fairly independent processes. They don't have a controller. They don't have an actor. They're just aspects of nature that are unrolling according to their own causes and conditions. And this is what human beings are made up of.

So one has to ask: Is there an I in this, or does this constitute a self? One way to ask that question is to say, maybe if taken apart, the self is nothing more than a bunch of aggregates, sort of put together in a certain way.

Here's an analogy. Assume everybody can recognize what this is. It's a pen, right? Everybody would agree to that. It's very easy to identify.

But if we examine this more closely, like the butcher carefully separating the cuts of meat in a cow, we see that it's actually composed of only five smaller parts: an ink cartridge, a barrel, a tip, a cap, and an end. That's all there is.

So now, is this a pen? We could debate that, but we wouldn't all agree so easily, would we? This individual part isn't really a pen. It becomes a pen when we assemble it properly, when the parts work together to support each other, when it fits in our hand in a certain way and allows us to write—when it carries out the function for which it was designed.

Now it's back to being a pen. But the pen doesn't really exist as a separate thing. It's simply a conglomeration of parts arranged in a particular way.

This is how the Buddha taught us to understand the human being. There is a being here—we recognize

that. This recognition is helpful. It's useful that when Scott goes to bed tonight, he goes to his room, and when I go to bed tonight, I go to my room, and we don't mix that up. This conventional understanding serves us well in social discourse—"my room" and "Scott's room."

But this doesn't mean there's actually something called "I" within this conglomeration of pieces. When we look closely, like that skilled butcher, there are only form, feeling, perceptions, formations, and consciousness. There's no "I" that glues it all together.

Yet we don't see this. We've been entranced by the word "I" since we were young enough to understand language, and we've invested it with a sense of self, a sense of identity.

So how do we create this sense of self? The Buddha was asked this question directly. In the Majjhima Nikaya, sutta number 109, "The Greater Discourse on the Full Moon Night," someone asked him how this view of self comes about—sometimes translated as "personality view." The Pali word is sakkāyadiṭṭhi. How do we create this view that there is a self, and what constitutes it?

This is who we think we are. We create this identity and extend it over time because we don't want to face the impermanent, unsolid nature of reality.

Here's the Buddha's answer: "An untaught, ordinary person"—meaning someone who hasn't encountered the Buddha's teachings—"regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form."

We create the "I" based on form in one of these four ways. The Buddha then repeats these same four formulations for feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. He identifies twenty ways that human beings construct their sense of self based on the aggregates—four ways for each of the five aggregates.

This reflection could carry you through the rest of the month, or two months for those staying that long. But let's examine just a piece of it. Let's look at how this relates to form.

The Buddha says a person "regards form as self." The simple statement of this is: "I am the body." We explored this early on. When asked, "How tall are you?" we answer "5'10"." We think, "I am the body." This is one way we create self around form.

Or we regard "self as possessing form"—that is, "This body is mine" or "This is my body." "My eyes are brown." This is a second way we create a sense of self based on this aggregate of form.

Or form as in self. We might say something like, "This body is part of me. I'm bigger than this body, but this body is a part of who I am." That can be felt sometimes too. That's form as in the self.

Or self as in form. That's "I dwell within this body." That's the observer behind the eyes piece.

In this very compact way—and some of the suttas are like this, really dense—the Buddha has outlined

twenty ways that we create a sense of self based on the five aggregates where there really isn't an intrinsic self there. So this is what we can start to see happening in our own experience. This is what we call identification. Identification is where we take an aspect of our experience and say, "That's I or mine."

When we talk about experience to each other, it's fine to use the word I or mine. "I had a sitting where my concentration was really steady for the whole hour." That's a fine thing to say in an interview. You don't need to say it to yourself. When you describe your experience to yourself, you don't need to use the word I or my. So you can notice when the thought of I arises and notice that maybe it's something extra.

Here's an interesting way to consider it. All the different experiences—we load them up with a sense of I, but do they need it? For instance, we might say to ourselves, "I have a pain in my knee." Do we really need to say "my knee"? Or could we just say, "There's a pain in the knee"? Or, "I'm feeling afraid right now." Do we need to say "I," or can we just say, "Fear is arising"? Or, "I'm feeling really happy right now." Oh, happiness is arising.

So an interesting question is: does the I ever arise or exist by itself? Or does it only get generated when we lay claim to some other part of our experience? Do you ever discover the naked I? Or is it only I related to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness? This would be interesting to know, because maybe the I is only dependently arisen, always based on something else that's happening to us. And what if we don't label it as we're feeling? Don't label it "I" as we're feeling it. How does that feel?

Part of the view of self—personality view—that we create is to extend over time. We think the self extends over time. If we didn't, we wouldn't be afraid of dying, right? If it was somebody else that was going to die, whether it's a year from now or ten years or fifty, it wouldn't bother us. But we think it's I that's going to die. So therefore, there's anxiety about that. We create this sense of self which we want to endure over time, and we pin it on these aspects of our experience.

But then in the sutta, the Buddha continues, saying: If we identify with form, he asks the bhikkhus he's talking to, "Is form permanent or impermanent?" After Carol's talk, we all know, right? Form is impermanent. "Is what is impermanent totally satisfactory or eventually unsatisfactory?" We have to say eventually unsatisfactory, because it's going to change. "Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is myself'?"

So we take things that we know are going to change and we say, "This is who I am." And we want to extend that I over time, but those two don't go together. All the things that we're claiming as I or mine eventually pass, and then the I is kind of stranded, disappointed, hit by that unsatisfactoriness.

The Buddha goes through these questions after form, also for feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. So he was then asked, "How does one see so that in regard to this body there is no I-making and my-making?"

When Bahiya finally reached the Buddha, the Buddha was walking on alms round in the town. Bahiya

approached him and said, "Blessed One, please teach me the Dhamma. Please teach me the Dhamma for my welfare and happiness."

The Buddha said, "This is not the right time, Bahiya. I am on alms round."

But Bahiya was persistent. He said, "Venerable sir, it's hard to know what dangers there might be for the Blessed One's life or for my life. Please teach me the Dhamma for my welfare and happiness."

Again the Buddha said, "This is not the time, Bahiya. I am on alms round."

But Bahiya asked a third time with the same urgency.

Then the Buddha gave him this teaching: "When, for you, Bahiya, in the seen there will be merely the seen; in the heard, merely the heard; in the sensed, merely the sensed; in the cognized, merely the cognized—then, Bahiya, you will not be 'by that.' When you are not 'by that,' you will not be 'in that.' When you are not 'in that,' you will not be 'here' or 'beyond' or 'between the two.' This itself is the end of suffering."

This is such a beautiful, condensed teaching. In the seen, merely the seen. When we see something, we don't need to add "I am seeing" or "I like what I see" or "This is mine." Just the seeing, without the one who sees. In the heard, merely the heard—just sound arising and passing away, without a listener. In the sensed and cognized, the same—just bare experience without the elaboration of self.

When you are not "by that"—when you don't identify with or position yourself in relationship to experience. When you are not "in that"—when you don't locate yourself inside the experience. Then you are not "here" or "there" or anywhere in between. The whole construction of self in relationship to a world collapses, and what remains is the end of suffering.

It is said that upon hearing this brief teaching, Bahiya immediately became fully awakened. Shortly afterward, he was gored by a cow and died, but he died as an arahant, completely free.

This story illustrates the power of this simple practice of not making I or mine. When we can meet experience directly, without the overlay of self-construction, liberation is possible. In each moment, with each sensation, feeling, or thought, we can practice this same instruction: merely what is, without the one to whom it belongs.

So he arrived in Savatthi and went to the dwelling place of the Buddha, asking for an audience, but the Buddha was on alms round in the town. Bahiya immediately went to the town and noticed this very noble being with a great deal of calm, poised bearing—a kind of regal countenance—walking up and down the street collecting his alms.

Bahiya immediately approached the Buddha, bowed down at his feet, touched his head to the Buddha's feet, and said, "Blessed One, I have come a long way. Please teach me your Dhamma. I want to

understand."

The Buddha said, "Bahiya, this is not the time for it. I'm collecting my alms food."

Bahiya replied, "Oh, Blessed One, I have come a long way. Who knows how long you will live or I will live? Please teach me the Dhamma in brief so that I can understand."

The second time he asked, the second time he was turned down. The Buddha said, "No, this is not the time for it. I'm collecting alms food."

So he asked again the same thing: "Who knows how long I will live or you will live? Please teach me."

The Buddha said, "All right, let me give you this teaching in brief. Bahiya, this is how you should train. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. In the cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Bahiya, who was already ripe and developed, heard that and fully awakened on the spot. The Buddha could then continue his alms round, which he did. An hour later, Bahiya was walking across a field where a cow was guarding a young calf and evidently felt threatened, charged Bahiya, gored him, and he died.

Think back to his question: "Who knows how long you will live or I will live? Please teach me the Dhamma." The Buddha taught, he awakened, and an hour later he had died. But this teaching that he received is one of the pithiest pointings in all of the suttas to this truth.

"In the seen, let there be just the seen" means there's no "I" added to that experience. "Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, then you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's sit together for a minute in quiet.

Therefore, all five aggregates should be seen as they really are with proper wisdom thus: "This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

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