The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:33

The subject of tonight's talk is that the five aggregates are not self. I want to explore through this schema of the five aggregates—one of the lists the Buddha used very often—this concept of self or I. I'll use the words "I" and "self" more or less interchangeably as we examine how this sense of self gets created and how it can be understood.

I think you all know that in the Buddha's understanding, this sense of self is not really necessary for the experience of being human. It's not considered a solid thing that we're endowed with from birth, but rather it's a concept that, if adhered to tightly, is generated by our own views and beliefs and then becomes a limiting factor in our life.

In fact, you could say that it's one of the key meanings of the word ignorance, which starts the whole chain of dependent origination that leads to suffering—this misunderstanding of the sense of I or self. As we develop a conviction in the true existence of this I or self, that becomes the basis of a lot of self-concern upon which is built hope and fear. Those movements of hope and fear narrow the mind and limit our attention and limit our empathy. An unlimited kind of awareness with a boundless heart of loving kindness gets smaller and contracted by the activities of self-concern and leads to a lot of suffering. This is why we really want to understand how this works, because this is one of the central pointings of the Buddha.

For most people, the I is really the center of the universe. Just like many centuries ago, they thought the Earth was the center of the universe and then discovered it actually wasn't, for most of us the I is the center of our universe. It's the concept that everything else revolves around—our thoughts and our plans, our ideas, our dreams, our wants and likes and dislikes, and our life direction. And it seems so obvious and self-evident. What could be more obvious than this I?

But have you ever been able to find it? Have you ever been able to locate it? You've been looking closely at this mind-body experience. Have you found a single thing called I? William James said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." The Dalai Lama said, "When something seems so evident but we search for it and can't find it, it's a sure sign of delusion."

The classical analogy is that there's a piece of rope on the ground made up of different colors braided together. One takes a quick look at it and thinks it's a snake and then jumps back in fear. But in fact, if one perceives it correctly and sees that it's actually a rope, then the fear goes away. And that's our understanding of self. When we perceive the self within this mind-body experience, there's fear. And when we can see it more clearly, some of that fear and worry lessens and eventually can go out altogether.

So let's start to look at some of the confusion around this use of the word I or self with a few questions. These are not tricky questions—they're straightforward questions.

The first one is: How tall are you? You can hopefully answer that fairly easily. I would say I'm 5 feet 10 inches tall. If you're from Europe, maybe you're 170 centimeters tall. Most of us know that answer. But when we say that without thinking, what do we really mean? We really mean this body is five foot 10 inches tall, right? My thoughts aren't 5'10", my insights aren't 5'10", my metta isn't 5'10". It's just this body that's 5'10". So when I say I am 5'10", we're saying I am the body, and it's five feet 10 inches tall. Here we're identifying I am the body—one common way.

But let me ask another question: What color are your eyes? I would say my eyes are brown. It's very common language—my eyes are brown. Well now I'm no longer the body but I'm something separate from the body that has eyes. So I turn into the owner of the body. First I'm the body and now I'm the owner of the body. Can you be both of those things? Which is right? Which are you?

We do the same thing with the mind. Sometimes we'll say, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." So there's the identifying of I with the mind state, the emotion—I am the emotion, happy or sad. Other times we'll talk about "my joys and my sorrows."

So now I'm not the emotion anymore. I'm the one who owns the emotion. So are you the body or the owner? Are you the emotion or the owner?

Another way that's really common to feel the "I" is to think that where we actually are is somewhere behind the two physical eyes, in the center of the head—maybe in the middle of the brain somewhere. We're like this central experiencer that everything comes into and happens to, and it's really all happening inside the head, somewhere behind the eyes. We're the one who sees sights and hears sounds and thinks thoughts and is the doer or the receiver of all the sense experience.

Actually, it's very interesting. One of the things they're finding in brain research is that there's no central control faculty in the brain. So it's kind of what the Buddha talked about a long time ago—there's no single controller even in that gray mass.

These are five ways of feeling ourselves to be, and there are more, but they're all not quite right. They're not really true in the final analysis. The Buddha said, "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." That's a pretty strong statement. However you imagine the self to be, the fact is ever other than that.

One of my teachers put it more strongly. He said, "Whatever you think is wrong." That was kind of to the point. And it reminded me of something I heard on the radio one time. I think it was a sportscaster who said, "The mind—often wrong, seldom in doubt." That's kind of our experience.

So we want to look into this sense of "I," and we can do it through some of the Buddha's classical teachings.

When the Buddha looked at a person, I don't think he saw a self the way that we tend to. He generally described us in one of two ways—kind of the whole human experience.

One of them I'll read to you from this sutta called the Sutta on Totality, from the Samyutta Nikaya. The Buddha said, "Bhikkhus, what is the totality of existence?" That's a bold statement, isn't it? "Listen, 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 touches, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond that as the totality would not be speaking of something they knew about."

This is very interesting. Joseph is fond of saying there are only ever six things happening: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. So this points that out, and it makes our task really simple, doesn't it? All we have to do is know those six things and not hang onto them. Easy, right? A little more complicated.

But this is a nice list. This is the list of the six sense bases called internal and external, and it maps onto our meditation instructions very well because our instructions are usually directed to some form of sense experience: knowing body sensations, knowing sounds, knowing thoughts, knowing emotions, knowing sights, smells, tastes, and so on. Bhikkhu Bodhi said that the Buddha usually used this list to help people cut through craving, because craving tends to orient around sense experience.

But there's another list that the Buddha used as often as the six sense bases, and that is the five aggregates. He's talking about the same totality of experience, but he's dividing it up in different ways. And in this list, the Buddha usually talked about it, according to Bhikkhu Bodhi, to cut through wrong view—and that is the misunderstanding of what constitutes the self.

So the five aggregates was kind of the Buddha's preferred way of looking at this question of self and where we misunderstand it. The value of our looking at this schema, this other map, is that as we look to see ourselves and others in this way, we look to see human life without the false sense of "I," without the conceptual overlay. We look to see things more as they really are.

So the five aggregates that we'll talk about this evening—the term "aggregate" is a translation of the Pali word khandha. In Sanskrit, the word is skandha, so you may hear Mahayana teachers talk about the five skandhas. It's the same list. The term "aggregate" is a translation I don't really like because it sounds very technical. It sounds kind of like road base, to be honest. You mix some asphalt and some concrete and cement and some mixed aggregate, and then you've got road base.

So instead of that, another translation I find more accessible is components—these are like five components that make up our experience. But even more simply, I like to translate khandha as "kinds of stuff." I think that conveys the essence best. These are the five kinds of stuff that make us up: material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. We'll explore each of them individually.

But I want to preface this by saying that when I first encountered this list, I thought it was too technical to be interesting. I didn't see how it would have any relevance to me as a person, as a human being. I thought it was a little too philosophical and intellectual.

It was over fifteen years ago now when one of my older sisters died. She was quite young—fifty-two. I was five years younger than she was, and her death came completely out of the blue. It was a real surprise. She was not in the best of health, but she was not seriously ill at the time. Yet one day in her house, she slipped into a coma. The paramedics couldn't bring her out of it, and she was dead within about twelve hours.

So it was a tremendous shock to her family and her children and, of course, to me, because I was pretty close to her at the time. I'd been on the phone with her a week before, and my sister was somebody who had a big personality. She was a very warm and funny person, and when you were around her, you couldn't miss the sense of her vitality. She was energetic and always enthusiastic about what she was up to.

So when she died, it was a shock of loss, of course, but I also couldn't understand how this being who had been so vital and engaged and active and alive a week earlier no longer existed. It just didn't compute for me. How could somebody who was so solid disappear and not exist any longer?

This became the motivation for me to start looking into: what is this mix of body and consciousness and thoughts and feelings that constitutes a human being? What is this mix? And how is it that at death the body is just left and everything else is gone? That's what was so puzzling.

The five aggregates became the most helpful way for me to understand this, which is ultimately a mystery. I can't say I understand birth and death, but it helped me to understand them better. The way it helped me was that I saw that a person was not just a unitary thing, but actually consisted of these five different processes, all going on in the same bundle or unit, but they are five very distinct activities that are happening. As I could begin to see the separate nature of them, I got a better sense of how they come together in us while we're alive and function together. But they're different activities.

So that's what I'd like to explore this evening.

The first of the khandhas, the first aggregate, is form or material form. The Pali word is rupa. The most dramatic part of rupa is the body, but rupa includes all physical form, all matter. All physical matter is included within rupa, both our own body and externally.

Here is the Buddha's definition of rupa: "Any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—this is the material form aggregate."

So it includes this body and everything we see in the outer world. In fact, rupa is often translated as "sights," so there's a strong connection with form as what we see. But it also includes all the interactions

among physical forms—sounds and tastes and smells as well as the touch of the body and all the sights that we see.

For example, when the bell is rung, that sound is in the form aggregate. This is considered part of the material world and part of material form, and therefore part of rupa. So in one fell swoop with this word rupa, we've included all five physical sense bases. In the six-sense-base outline, the first five are the physical senses—they're all subsumed under rupa.

Now what we have left is mind and mind objects.

So the other four aggregates are mind and mind objects. This gets more interesting. Let's look into this mind in a little more detail.

The first mental aggregate is feeling tone or vedana. This is the same quality that Andrea talked about in the instructions the other morning. So you know from that that feeling tone comes in three flavors: pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The significance of this, of course, is that these form the basis for craving. In the chain of dependent origination, craving is activated by feeling tone. As you were probably working with, the feeling tone of the pleasant is what stimulates, if we're not mindful, the reactive formation of greed. The feeling tone of unpleasant can stimulate the reactive formation of aversion. And the feeling tone of neither—shorthand we say neutral—can stimulate the reactive formation of delusion.

So I wondered about this: how is it that delusion is part of craving? We ignore things, we overlook the neutral, and that's an aspect of craving. Why is that? Because the neutral itself doesn't seem like it evokes craving. So the way it makes sense to me is that when craving is active, all we care about are the pleasant and the unpleasant. We're looking for those. And because we're focused on those out of either greed or aversion, we just don't care about the neutral because it neither entices us nor threatens us. So we tend to overlook it.

You can see this—take a simple example of colleagues at work. If there's someone you really like, you dwell on that person with thought, don't you? If there's someone who's really difficult, you dwell on that person with thought. If there's somebody who doesn't rub you one way or another, it's very easy to forget about them, isn't it? This is kind of the way pleasant, unpleasant, and neither work in our sense experience.

The interesting thing is that feeling tone is in the mental half of the aggregates. So when we hear the sound of the bell, generally that's a pleasant tone. Intrinsically it's kind of pleasing. But it's even more pleasing because it marks the end of a sitting. That's one of the eight best moments of the day, when that bell rings. So we really come to—Pavlov dogs—we really come to like that particular sound, so it generally will strike us as pleasant.

But it's interesting: it's our own mind that is giving it that tone. It's not intrinsic to the sound itself. Sayadaw U Tejaniya sort of describes this—he uses feeling in this sense rather as a verb. It's like we feel our way into the association with that sound. We impute pleasantness as an activity of the mind.

How do we know that? Because some people experience things as pleasant which other people experience as unpleasant. Simple example: When I was growing up, my mother liked to play records, albums of Mantovani recordings. If your experience with music goes back to the 1950s, you will recall that Mantovani was a conductor who had an orchestra that played a lot of movie soundtracks. So it was kind of these lush orchestral arrangements with swelling strings and big crescendos—sentimental movie music, very emotional generally. My mother really enjoyed that kind of music. So I grew up listening to it, and I didn't mind it too much.

Some years ago, there was a 7-Eleven store in Southern California that was having a problem with people coming into the parking lot to deal drugs. When people were dealing drugs in the parking lot, other customers didn't want to come in because it didn't feel safe to them. So the store owner would go out and ask the dealers to leave, but they wouldn't. Then he'd call the police and ask them to leave, and then they'd leave, but then the police would go away and they'd come back. He didn't know what to do about the drug dealers in the parking lot.

So what he did is he put Mantovani on his sound system, cranked up the outside speakers, and the drug dealers fled. Because they did not find Mantovani pleasant.

So my mother found Mantovani very pleasant. The drug dealers did not find Mantovani pleasant.

And that's because feeling tone comes out of the mind, not intrinsic to the thing itself.

So the next of the mental aggregates is perception. The Pali word is saññā. And I think probably Bhante talked about this a bit the other night when he talked about papañca and the Honeyball Sutta, where saññā is a key term in the Honeyball Sutta.

Perception in the Buddhist language means something different than it does in Western philosophy and psychology. I think in Western philosophy and psychology, perception usually means the sense data itself—like a sound might be considered a perception. But in the Buddhist language, it's different than that. So you might have to unlearn some of that Western language for a minute.

Perception here means really recognition. That is, something arises in one of our senses, and we recognize what it is based on prior experience and familiarity and memory.

So, simple example: as you look around the room tonight, if your eyes are open, you probably see women and men and chairs and cushions and lights and floor and ceiling and statue. And you recognize all those things. And it's happening so fast that it's virtually automatic. It's a categorization feature of the mind that's connected to memory.

We're doing it all the time; we don't know that we're doing it. But often as the mental process slows down in meditation, we can see these perceptions happen. A sound arises and we recognize not only sound—we might recognize truck. Or there's a sound in the hall; we recognize hearing, we also notice sneeze, something like that. So the recognition is happening, sometimes with words, sometimes wordlessly, but still you know what it is.

And we think this is just kind of the way things are. We don't realize that we've learned through repeated contact to recognize these things. But a little story from Oliver Sacks illustrates this. He's the neurologist who works in a hospital and has a lot of fascinating case studies.

So he had a chance to work with a patient who had been blind since he was a young boy. Maybe three years old or so, he lost his sight. And then medical technology evolved and they developed the surgical tools that would let him see again. And by that point, he was in his mid-50s.

So they performed the operation on the man, and he was recovering in his hospital bed and the day came to take the bandages off his eyes. So his family was there, the surgeon was there, Sacks was there. They took the bandages off and they expected him to go, "Wow, it's fantastic, I can see again." But the man didn't say anything. He was still lying back in bed and he didn't really respond.

And finally, the man said that he couldn't make any sense of what he was seeing. There was a visual field, but all he could really see was patches of form and color, and he didn't know what they were. Until, he said, this kind of white object started looming from the distance toward him and seemed to say, "Can you see me?" And he recognized the surgeon's voice and he thought, "That must be my surgeon's face coming toward me." But he couldn't perceive the objects of the room in the way that we do without even trying.

So the story goes on. The man did a lot of rehab and a lot of training, and he eventually learned to perceive again fairly well. But some of those circuits hadn't been wired up in the developmental stage when he was younger, and he never recovered full perception again.

So this quality of perception is something that we definitely learn, and then we use almost automatically.

And something else about it is that it comes from repeated recognition, repeated contact, and some familiarity. So it's not just as simple as woman, man, cushion, chair, wall, because the things we see have emotional resonance that comes through in the perception.

So when you see an old friend, you don't have to think, "Oh, I've known this person for 20 years and we had these experiences together and this was beautiful and this was difficult." But just seeing your friend, that whole gestalt comes through as you perceive them. So perception is also very rich with meaning. Sometimes the meaning is accurate, sometimes it's not so accurate.

Simple example: If I say "car," that's a fairly neutral word. There isn't much emotional resonance, is there? And we generally don't get too emotional about "car."

But what if I say "Prius"? Do you like Prius? I really like Prius. I don't have one.

I kind of envy my friends who do. It seems like half my friends have Prii. But I really like them because I think they're one of the best cars to combat climate change and global warming. Fifty miles to the gallon—wow, that is so cool. So I have a very warm association with Prius.

And then I think about another car—Ferrari. I have a different resonance with Ferrari. I think, wow, it's a pretty cool car, but gets twelve miles to the gallon. So I think probably the engine's too big, not so good for global warming. So I have a different resonance with that.

So perception also is not always reliable. The difference between Prius and Ferrari—that can be pretty fact-based. But as Bonnie said in talking about the vipalasas, we see things as permanent which are actually impermanent. We see things as offering lasting happiness which do not provide that. We see things as self which are not self, and so on.

So we have to be watchful of our perceptions. Because they come so quickly, it's not always so easy to see them. We have to be watchful and mindful to notice when they're forming and to check them out to see if they're accurate.

I heard this very touching story this summer. I was listening to a woman who was talking about race in this country, and she had a very interesting history. She was European American, and her first husband was also European American, and they had a daughter. So the daughter had grown up some, and then her husband died, and she married again. Her second husband was African American, and they had a daughter. And so this daughter, being mixed race, was taken in the wider world as an African American. And the first daughter was taken as white.

And what this woman said that was so moving, and of course sad, is that those two girls had very different journeys in their life. The first daughter had all the privilege of being accepted into the world based on her whiteness, and all kinds of doors opened for her. And the other girl, being perceived as African American, did not have all those advantages, and the doors didn't open for her in the same way.

She didn't have to go into a lot of detail, but I could just imagine the milieu of both those girls growing up and the different responses they would get from classmates, from teachers, from classmates' parents, from boys in high school, from professors in college, from sororities, from employers.

What was so moving about it was that both girls got the same kind of love and care at home. And so they grew up with a sense of self-love and self-respect. And for one, that self-love and self-respect was mirrored in the outer world. And for the other, it was not. And that's kind of heartbreaking—that beautiful young children don't get mirrored based on who they truly are, but get mirrored based on people's distorted perceptions based on race or ethnicity. So that's a sad fact of our life in America today, and one that I hope we can overcome for the benefit of all those beautiful children who are growing up here.

So very simply, when we hear the bell and we recognize it as a sound and we recognize it as the bell that ends the sitting, that's the activity of perception going on all the time. And we can start to pay attention to when that categorization happens, when that naming happens for us.

The next of the mental aggregates is a big one. It's called mental formations, sometimes called volitional formations or karmic formations. This is the one that includes all the other thoughts and mind states and feelings that aren't included in feeling and perception. So this includes all the range of the hindrances and the difficult emotions, all the movements of greed, aversion, delusion, all the beautiful states of heart and mind—qualities of love and compassion, refined meditative qualities of mindfulness, concentration, equanimity. All of these are lumped under mental formations.

These are the objects of mind, along with our thoughts. So it's basically thoughts and mind states that make up this whole vast category. And the reason they're called volitional formations is that most of these mind states are expressing something. Desire expresses a kind of intention. Anger expresses a kind of intention. Loving kindness expresses a kind of intention. Even refined states of mindfulness and concentration are there because we've intended them, because we've grown them as habits in the mind.

So this intentional or volitional quality is also why they're sometimes called karmic formations—volition or intention being the root of karma. We understand that within this aggregate of mental formations are all the factors of the path. Bonnie was talking about how we nourish the wholesome factors, and this is what accelerates our journey along the path. These are all found here.

For example, when we hear the bell marking the end of a sitting, we may feel, ah, now I can relax. And then the thought might come: Wow, I could sit forever now.

So that quality of relaxation or ease, that thought "I could sit forever," these are mental formations. This is in the basket, the aggregate, called sankharas in Pali.

The fifth of the aggregates, the last mental aggregate, is called consciousness. The Pali word is vijnana. This is a very subtle experience to tune into. It is something that we can find and know directly in our meditation, but it's not easy to take hold of. It is the knowing quality.

Consciousness is that receptive element, as the Buddha described it—that receptive element of mind that knows all the other objects. So consciousness knows sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, thoughts, and emotions. It receives them. It holds them. It's how we experience the world. It is this factor of consciousness that gives rise to our experience in life.

Again, a simple example. When you hear a sound, there are actually two things going on. Mostly, we've just talked about the sound. I don't know what that is—it might be F sharp or something like that. The sound has a material quality that we can identify, and it's in the field of rupa. But because you're a sentient being, you're a conscious being, you're hearing it. If that sound was struck and there was no one in the room, the sound waves would happen, but there would be no hearing taking place, because this

hearing depends on our being conscious.

We can start to feel in our meditation practice what's the sound, which is the rupa part, and what's the knowing of it. That's the consciousness piece. It comes as one experience, but it's got these two aspects that we can start to feel into.

So how is it that one thing can have two aspects? Let me ask you: Is this round or is it black? It's round and black, isn't it? But you can focus on the roundness or you can focus on the blackness by choosing. Similarly, when a sound arises, you can focus on the physical quality or you can focus on—oh, there's knowing in the mind of that sound. And that knowing is this element of vijnana.

So it's not something you can take direct hold of because it's doing the holding. It's holding another object, but if you draw your attention close, you can start to intuit how this knowing is taking place. It's a very interesting practice as you start to come close to that.

So these are the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. One of the interesting things about the aggregate list as opposed to the sense bases list is that all five aggregates are present in every moment of experience. So you might have an experience where there's not a sound or where there's not a taste or where there's not a smell. Some of the sense bases might not be there. But the five aggregates are always there in some form, doing their thing. So they're always available. When you want to tune into them, they're always there.

When I first started working with this list, I thought, this is kind of a funny list. It drags out things like feeling and perception, but it doesn't drag out other special things like volition and attention. Those are really important factors too, but they aren't dragged out of sankharas into this special, unique category. Why is that? But it doesn't matter so much.

When the Abhidhamma goes through what makes up a human being, they only have three categories. What the Abhidhamma does is to list rupa, which is our rupa; citta, which is like our vijnana, consciousness; but then it throws feeling and perception back into sankharas and just calls these mental factors.

This is very interesting because when you look at a person you can see—oh, there's a body, there's consciousness, which is this brightness of knowing, and there are all the states of mind. That's a very interesting way to look at people, and to look at yourself. Basically what we are is a body, plus consciousness, plus mental states. That's it.

When I saw that, I understood how my sister could die and I could lose her. Because the body was still there, but the consciousness and the mental states, which had always been joined, weren't. So that's what breaks apart with dying.

I don't know where consciousness and mental states go, if they go anywhere. But I understood that ending

better than I had before.

So it doesn't matter really whether it's three or five or eight aggregates. The important thing is: is this list exhaustive? Meaning, any aspect of your experience—can you toss it into one of these five categories? I'm just going to ask that for tonight. You don't have to answer because it takes some reflection. If you can toss everything that's part of you into one of these five categories, then it's an exhaustive list. It covers everything in our experience.

I'm going to suggest it is exhaustive. I'll let you reflect on that.

And then why is that important? Because there's a big word that's missing from this list. And that big word is *I*. There's no I in this list. So what the Buddha is saying is that in our experience, there is form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness, and that's sufficient. That's all that's needed. The I is extra, not required—a redundancy. Can it be taken out? The Buddha said it could.

That fascinates me—that we could see our experience as these five things and not overlay it with any conjecture about I or self. In fact, he said this is the way to the end of suffering. He talked about this overlay as what he called *ahankara* and *mamankara*, which literally means "I-making" and "mine-making." So he says we construct the I by concocting a sense of "I" or "mine."

So how do we do that? He talked about this in a number of suttas, and let's go through it a little bit. First, he said, take a look at these five aggregates from the point of view of permanence, happiness, and self.

So he said, "Take a look at form. Is form permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Very good. So then, is what is impermanent capable of giving lasting happiness, or is it ultimately going to be unsatisfactory? If something's impermanent, can it give lasting happiness?"

"No, venerable sir. Ultimately unsatisfactory."

"Very good, bhikkhus. Now, is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change fit to be regarded as 'this is mine, this I am, this is myself'?" In other words, why would we invest ourselves in something that we knew was going to change and not give happiness? Would that be for our benefit?

So the bhikkhus, being very smart, said, "No, venerable sir, that would not be for our benefit."

This is a very succinct way of relating to your experiences with form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness—or for that matter, the six sense bases. What if you find yourself seeing them as "this is mine, this I am, this is myself"? Then we can reflect on that.

So then the question comes: how does the self actually get generated? I want to ask another question. Do you ever find the I all by itself? Looking through the body and mind and sense experience, does it ever just

stand out? "This is the I. I've got it." Or is I always coming in in relation to something else?

So there's a thought about being at home, then the phrase comes: "I'm thinking about my home." There's a pain in the leg and there's the thought: "I have a pain in the leg." Is the I only coming into being based on other things?

I want to suggest that for your reflection. Do you ever find the I standing on its own, or is it only being established in relation to other things?

The Buddha taught that this is what constitutes I-making and my-making—taking ownership of or identifying with different aspects of our experience. Yet this I-making and my-making is not necessary, not required.

One of the places we most easily identify is with the body. How can we relate to it without so much sense of I or mine? The body usually brings up many emotions for us. We like our body or dislike certain aspects of it. We feel proud of some things about it, embarrassed about others. But essentially, did you have anything to do with the way your body came out?

Think about emerging from the womb and then growing up. Did you have anything to do with how tall you are, the size of your bones, the overall shape of your frame, the color of your hair or skin, the color of your eyes? We can affect the body somewhat through diet and exercise and care and good cosmetics, but the basic makeup of the body didn't come from us.

We take ownership of it, but how did it come? Our father's sperm met our mother's egg. The cells combined and multiplied. That organism was nourished in the womb. Birth happened, then it grew on food and water and air. The aging process began—we grew up and got bigger, then the aging process continued to where some of us are now. All beyond our control. We didn't ask for it. We didn't control it. It just happened.

Why? Because the body is part of physical nature—just part of physical nature, not under our control, not under our direction, not under our will. So why do we claim it?

Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of my teachers in Thailand, put it this way: this body came out of nature, it's part of nature, it's never departed from nature, and it belongs to nature. So give it back to nature. That will be a big relief for you.

But we claim it, don't we? We think it's I or mine. We didn't have that much to do with it.

Emotions are also part of nature—part of mental nature. We all have all of them. We all have wanting and love and fear and sadness and grief and anger and joy and compassion. They're just part of the mental nature.

This teaching comes from the Buddha on how to see with wisdom: "All form should be seen as it really is

with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.'"

We can apply this. When we see ourselves making I and mine around any experience, physical or mental, we can remind ourselves: not me, not mine, not who I am. We can say that about every aspect of our experience—not me, not mine, not who I am.

This kind of pointing was beautifully summed up in one of the suttas from the Udana. I'm sure many of you are familiar with it—the story of Bahiya.

Bahiya was a practitioner in a different part of India. He had many students and had developed wonderful spiritual qualities. Enough of his students thought he was enlightened that Bahiya himself wondered: Am I enlightened? Of course, that question might have been a clue.

One day he was visited by a deva. Bahiya said, "You know, I have many students and I'm their teacher, but I wonder if I'm enlightened." The deva was very straight with him: "No, Bahiya, you're not enlightened."

You're not even on a path to enlightenment. Sorry to tell you. But there is a teacher in northern India who is fully enlightened, who is fully awakened. He's called Gautama Buddha. And he's residing in this particular town.

As soon as Bahiya heard this, being such a sincere seeker, he immediately picked up and started walking hundreds of miles to find the Buddha. He finally came to the small town where the Buddha was said to be staying. He found some monks and figured that might be where he'd find the Buddha, but the Buddha wasn't there. The monk said, "No, he's out collecting his morning alms. But he's just down the road. You can probably go find him."

Bahiya walked into the town and saw this very dignified, majestic being walking with great poise and equanimity. He thought that must be the Buddha they were talking about. So he approached and said, "Venerable sir, are you Gautama Buddha? I'd like to ask you a question."

The Buddha said, "Yes, I am that person, but this is not a good time. As you can see, I'm on my alms round."

Bahiya said, "Venerable sir, please give me your teaching in brief. I've come a very long way. Please give me your teaching in brief."

The Buddha said, "I'd be happy to meet with you later, but I can't right now. I'm collecting my morning meal."

Bahiya asked a second time, and the Buddha again said no. He asked a third time: "Please give me your teaching in brief. Life is uncertain. We never know how long either of us may be alive."

As these stories often go, by the time you ask the Buddha the third time, he has to agree. So he said, "I will tell you, Bahiya, in brief." This is the teaching he gave him called the Bahiya Sutta:

"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. And 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. Then you will be neither here nor there, nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Bahiya was so ready and his paramis were so well developed that he came to full enlightenment on the spot from hearing that short discourse from the Buddha. He awakened fully to the truth through this door of not-self. When the Buddha said, "In the seen, let there be just the seen," what's missing is the I, the one who says, "I am seeing," or "I am seeing my body." The I is not there. In the seen, let there be just what is seen. On that, Bahiya awakened.

It's said that later in that same day, Bahiya was crossing a field where a cow was protecting her baby calf. The cow felt threatened by Bahiya's presence in the field, charged him, and gored him right in the stomach. Bahiya died that day from the goring. But fortunately, before he died, he had heard the teaching and fully awakened to the truth of the Dhamma, knowing that time was short.

This is the investigation, the inquiry that opens up this field of understanding what's meant by not-self. Self is something we add to a situation. If we don't add "I" or "my," our original relationship to what is seen and heard and cognized can be free of self, free of that burden.

It may sound intellectual or like we're developing some cold scientific view, but it doesn't feel like that. Because the more the burden of self is taken off our shoulders, the more the heart relaxes and opens. The more the heart relaxes, then these beautiful qualities can come through—trust, faith, confidence and joy, balance, love and compassion. When the heart is unburdened, it naturally opens and connects with the world.

So I close with this quotation, which you've probably heard many times, but I find it particularly fitting for this exploration. It's from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who said: "Love tells me I'm everything. Wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows."

This is the marriage of insight and loving kindness. When we see through the construction of self, we don't become cold or disconnected. Rather, we discover this beautiful dance between the wisdom that recognizes no-thing-ness and the love that embraces everything. Between these two poles, our life flows.

Let's just sit for a moment in this understanding.

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

The Buddha's teaching points us toward this profound simplicity—this recognition that what we take to be our burden, our self, is actually something we're adding to the pure awareness that is always already here. In seeing this clearly, we find not emptiness, but fullness. Not disconnection, but the most intimate

connection possible with all of life.

Thank you for your attention to this teaching.

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