The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:55

The subject of the talk this evening is the five aggregates are not self. As you might deduce from the title, this is going to be a talk about one of Buddhism's central teachings—the teachings on not-self.

The teaching on not-self is one of the most powerful teachings that the Buddha gave, and it's a teaching that's unique, I believe, to Buddhism. It is often paired with two other pointings: impermanence and unsatisfactoriness. Together these three—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—are considered the three characteristics of things that exist. Tonight we're just going to look at the last of these, the teaching on not-self. Impermanence you're probably fairly familiar with. Bonnie is going to talk about unsatisfactoriness or dukkha in a couple of nights, so this will round out the three characteristics.

The teaching on not-self is a powerful teaching, a profound teaching, but it's also one of the hardest to understand in all of Buddhism. So welcome to the evening. In that it is not easy to understand, I just want to offer this as an exploration of the theme. It's not that you are supposed to get it all tonight. Some of you may already have a very good understanding of this topic, and hopefully this will be a refresher and maybe a little deepening. If this is somewhat new to you, then don't strain too much conceptually. Just kind of take in the drift of it and don't bother thinking too much about it. Don't worry if it doesn't all make sense. It's not supposed to on first hearing. And also notice if there's any resistance to hearing it. We are a little bit attached to the self, so there might not be an interest in hearing about not being there. Just notice that.

What the Buddha said is that the sense of self is not really intrinsic to our experience of being a human being, but it's something that arises based on our concepts and our beliefs. So in meditation, we want to look at what that means. Is it possible for us to have experiences where the sense of self isn't present or isn't really intrusive? How does that feel? And how would it feel when the self comes in again?

This belief in self, the Buddha more or less equated with this fundamental factor of ignorance. One of the fundamental ways that ignorance manifests is that we don't understand the truth about the sense of self. And this is a cause for a lot of self-concern. The more we dwell on self-concern, the more we isolate ourselves from the wider field of humanity, creatures, and nature. That isolation, which is engendered by our thinking, leads to a sense of separation. The separation leads to a sense of fear. We create this strong duality between the self and the other, between self and the world. And then we live in that tension. Once we've created the duality and firmly established it and believe in it, there's a tension that we live within that creates a fundamental anxiety in us.

There's this wonderful teacher from India, who passed away twenty or more years ago, named

Nisargadatta Maharaj. He was a Vedanta teacher who lived and taught in Bombay. He wrote a powerful book called *I Am That*—highly recommended if you haven't encountered it. And this is one of his comments: "All yogas"—and yoga is a word that just means joining or union, so he would see our way of practice as another yoga in his system—"All yogas, all real spiritual practices, have only one aim: to save you from the calamity of separate existence."

So right now, we are kind of in that calamity. Most of us are living from that sense of separation. And the teaching on not-self is to bring us out of that, to see clearly the way things are and bring us out of that. Because when we release the self-concern, we can open in a much broader way to life. We have a much more inclusive vision of life. The boundlessness of the brahmaviharas are one expression of that. And the expression of wisdom leads to spaciousness, openness, lightness, and ease.

So in the talk this evening, we want to look at how the self gets formed and how it might be to see things without it. This notion of "I"—basically self—appears whenever we say the words "I," "me," "my," "mine," and really believe in them. I mean, it's possible—the Buddha talked about "I." He used it, but he wasn't caught in it. But for the most part, when we use it, we believe in it.

And that's a problem.

So this sense of I appears frequently in our thoughts. It's the center of our life. It's kind of our North Star. Everything revolves around the I—our thoughts, our views, our actions, our speech, our decisions, our values, our life's direction. And so we want to understand what it really means.

This I seems so self-evident, but have you ever found it? Have you ever come across it in meditation? You've been exploring mind and body in a very dedicated way for these two weeks and a long time before. Have you ever found this I?

So William James, the philosopher, said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." And the Dalai Lama said, "When you think something is real, but you can't find it, that's a sign of delusion." It may not be as real as you think.

So the classical analogy is you're walking in the forest and you come upon this thing on the ground that is colored—it's white, red, and green, and it's about this long and it's in a coil on the ground. And as you're walking along, you're convinced that's a snake. And so you jump back in fear. And as you get a little closer, you look at it more precisely. Oh, it's a piece of rope. I thought it was a snake, but it's actually a piece of rope. Your perception has become clarified. Now you're no longer afraid. The rope's not going to bite you.

So it's just this way. We think that this human body and mind and heart contain a self. And that's scary. That's separating. It leads to isolation. We're afraid of dying. When we understand it the way it is, it takes that fear away. So it's a matter of correcting our perception.

This use of the word I comes with some what I would call faulty logic. We use it all the time. We've used it

since we learned to speak. It's been a very common word for us. And we've just kind of built our views around the conventions of language. But we've never really stopped to think about it.

So let's look at some of these ways language is just kind of funny. So let me ask a simple question: How tall are you? And you can answer that pretty easily. I would say I'm five feet, ten inches tall. So what I really mean is the body is five feet, ten inches tall, right? My thoughts aren't five foot ten, my mood isn't five foot ten, but the body is five foot ten. So here we're using I to mean the body. "I am five foot ten" means the body is five foot ten. We're equating I with the body.

Okay, now let me ask: What color are your eyes? Again, easy question. I'd say—this is not a trick—so I'd say, my eyes are brown. So now I'm not the body. That would be the eyes. You know, if I were to say, "I'm brown," that would mean I'm the eyes. But I'm saying my eyes are brown. That means now I'm the owner of the body. And that means something separate from it that possesses it.

So which are you? Are you the body or are you the owner of it? And can you be both? Does that really make sense?

That you're both the body and the owner of it?

Let's examine the mind. We might speak of our emotions and say, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." Here we're equating the "I" with the emotion of happiness or sadness—so here I am the emotion. But we can also speak of "my joys" and "my sorrows." Now we are the owner of the emotion. So which are you? Are you the emotion or the owner of it? Can you be both?

Another way we commonly think of ourselves—at least I do, and you can tell me if you do—is that we feel the "I" is really a small being located in the head, behind the eyes and between the ears, kind of in the center here, looking out at the world and having all kinds of experiences. This "I" is doing the seeing, the hearing, the observing. It's somehow separate from what is being seen and heard and observed. There's a separate little being that's like the essence—the little guy right in the center of things who's observing, watching, hearing, experiencing it all. This is the sense of "I" as observer.

There's also the sense that this "I" should be able to control things. We should be able to make our body feel better when we sit. We should have a better mood when we wake up in the morning. It's this kind of experiencer and controller that has that responsibility.

So these are five ways we use the word "I"—as the body, as the owner of the body, as the emotions, as the owner of the emotions, and as a separate observer somewhere inside the head. Can all those be true? Or have we created a really confused concept that meditation might help us straighten out? Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

Here's a quote from the Buddha: "In whatever way they conceive of the self, the truth is ever other than that." We may be conceiving it a little bit wrong.

I had a teacher who put it even more bluntly. He said, "Everything you think is wrong." That's a good wake-up call. It reminds me of something someone said on a talk radio show. Talk radio shows are not generally the font of wisdom in this country, but one incisive comment was about the mind: "The mind—often wrong, seldom in doubt."

This is how it is about the self. We really believe it's like this, and we seldom doubt it. But it may be helpful to question this belief, because as long as we believe in the self in this way, we're bound up with separation, we're bound with fear.

So how did the Buddha see—how did an awakened being see—our process, our existence? When you and I look at one another, typically we see a person. Certainly before we get engaged in meditative insight, we look at each other and we see a person.

There's a sixth-century commentary from Sri Lanka called the Visuddhimagga. It was a compilation of meditation techniques and insight practices from that time. It's still used today as a manual in Buddhist countries. In the Visuddhimagga, the text says that imagining you're looking at someone and seeing a person is not the way a trained meditator would see it.

The analogy it uses is with a butcher. Now, personally, I've been a vegetarian for many years. I'm committed to animal welfare, and I don't like to talk about the suffering and slaughter of animals. Nonetheless, this text uses the analogy of a butcher. So please excuse that, but this is the classical reference.

When a butcher carves up the carcass of a cow that he's going to sell for meat, he doesn't think to himself, "cow, cow, cow." He thinks, "rump, sirloin, tenderloin, ribs." Because he's so familiar with the cow, he knows what those parts are. He doesn't just see cow—he sees the details of cow.

So the Visuddhimagga said that one who has looked deeply into the mind-body process doesn't just say "person." They see the particular parts that make up a person, both in the mental sphere and in the physical sphere.

When the Buddha talked about what a person is, he used two different models. You could say he saw in two ways. One of them is six types of sense organs and six objects.

So this is from a discourse called the Sutta on Totality from the Samyutta Nikaya. Let me read a section of it:

"Bhikkhus"—and this applies to you all because you're practitioners—"what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully and I will teach you the totality of life. It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality would not be speaking of something they knew about."

This is pretty exhaustive, isn't it? It describes our experience as human beings—the six senses, including the mind as the sixth, and their corresponding objects. That's what our experience is made up of. It's beautiful because this is so simple. At any time there are only six things happening: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects with their organs.

This maps really nicely to our meditation practice. You may have noticed that many of our instructions follow this schema. The Buddha mostly used the map of the six sense bases to cut through craving by highlighting where we get desirous of pleasant experience at these sense doors.

But there's another model that he used just as often—the model that John talked about a couple of nights ago called the five aggregates. The five aggregates also describe this totality of experience, but they divide it up differently. This device the Buddha used to cut through wrong view—wrong view meaning the sense of belief in a self.

So we're going to examine this a little tonight by looking through the false way that we create a sense of self. And I want to say that this can sound abstract. Perhaps in listening to the talk the other night and perhaps in listening to this talk, you'll think, "Oh, this is just intellectual theory. This is Buddhist jargon. It doesn't have anything to do with me and my real experience of life."

But I want to share that the five aggregates really became alive for me and meaningful when one of my older sisters died. She was five years older than me and she died when she was fifty-one, quite unexpectedly. She had an illness for a long time, but it wasn't life-threatening. And then all of a sudden one evening, she had an attack of some kind. She went into cardiac arrest and the medical technicians were not able to bring her back.

I had talked with her on the phone just a few days before, and she was bright and vital and energetic. She was a big personality. I had a close connection with her—she had a lot of humor and a lot of heart. And to hear that she had passed away so suddenly was really a shock to me.

I'm sure you have probably all come into contact with this around death—that somebody can seem so alive, so real, so solid, such a strong person, and then at some point they're just gone. And I couldn't make sense of it. She had been there, and then she was just gone.

The thing that helped me understand it was looking at her experience through the five aggregates and understanding the different elements that make up a human being. And by understanding her, I came to understand myself a lot more deeply. It brought me a great deal more peace and ease with the process of dying.

So the five aggregates can be very meaningful in our exploration of them. They are really a description of life and, by extension, a description of the ending of life.

The Pali word is *khanda*. It covers five elements: form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

The first aggregate is physical—it means all physical matter in the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. The other four are mental.

I don't want to go through those in detail because I think John probably covered them quite well. I do want to highlight a little bit this factor of perception, because perception is something we don't spend a lot of time talking about, but it's a really powerful quality.

I may have mentioned in a morning discussion that what we see in the visual field is just patches of form and color. It's quite interesting, especially if you take out the added dimension of depth. If you cover an eye and just look with one eye, you take away the depth perception. And what we really see are patches of form and color.

When artists come to learn to paint accurately, they have to learn to see this two-dimensional view of things—this play of light and shape—in order to represent it correctly. So in this model of form and color, we have learned over time to draw elements out and assign names to them: cushion, floor, person, chair, lamp, door, ceiling.

Well, we had to learn that perception. We might think it happens automatically, but it's not like that. This is a description from Oliver Sacks, the neurologist who had been involved in treating a man who had been blind from the time he was very young—blind almost from infancy—and then found out that he could have an operation to restore his sight.

The man's name was Virgil. He was lying in the hospital bed, his sight having been restored. Sacks was there and the surgeon was there, and they were peeling off the bandages from his eyes. Everyone thought he would exclaim, "Wow, this is fantastic, I can see again! Here you all are and it's just wonderful!" It didn't happen like that.

This is Sacks' description of Virgil's first moments after the surgery: "He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing, at the surgeon who stood before him still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke—saying, 'Well?'—did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face." Virgil told Sacks later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, meaningless—a blur. Then out of the blur came a voice that said, "Well?" And only then did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face, and indeed the face of his surgeon.

Virgil had gone through the years when the perceptual wiring gets developed in the brain, and he hadn't learned how to do that. So as a grown man, he couldn't recognize things. With a lot of training, some of that perception started to occur for him naturally, but it never came back fully the way it is for us. He went through the rest of his adult life struggling to perceive objects out of the blur of form and color.

For us, we do this perception almost automatically. I'm going to add a little postscript here because it ties into what for me is an interesting question. There was a question this morning about whether

mindfulness is a conceptual activity. The Abhidhamma says that the proximate cause for mindfulness to arise is strong perception. Can you get that? When you perceive clearly what your experience is—in the nature of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, in-breath, out-breath, mood, feeling tone, et cetera—mindfulness happens. Mindfulness happens with the recognition of what we're experiencing, and that is perception. So when there's strong perception, mindfulness follows.

Now, is perception a conceptual activity? When you walk into the room and you see Sally and you recognize her as Sally, does it require words to do that? Or when you look up at this altar and you see the statue of the Buddha, you recognize that's what the statue is of. Do you say words every time you see that? It doesn't require words, does it? If you see a good friend, do you say to yourself, "Good friend is coming"? No, you just recognize that's a good friend.

So perception is built on names. We recognize it's in the category: mat, chair, statue, painting, door, et cetera. But the recognition, when it happens, doesn't require the concepts to come up again. In this way, perception doesn't have to be a conceptual activity, and mindfulness doesn't need to be a conceptual activity, though it is built on our prior familiarity with those categories. I hope that's clear.

Perception is very powerful because once we perceive something in the world, we form a view about it and then we act in the world based on that view. If we perceive someone as friendly to us, we act toward them based on that view and we tend to respond with friendliness. If we perceive someone as hostile or critical to us, we form a view about that person and then we tend to respond to them out of that view. So the moment of perception is a very powerful moment in forming our mental structures and then conditioning our actions.

One of the kickers about perception is it's not always reliable. I was practicing on a meditation retreat on the East Coast. It was a fall morning, and I was doing my walking meditation outdoors when all of a sudden I heard a brass band coming up the street. I distinctly heard horns and trumpets, and they were coming closer and closer as I was walking. This is a little bit unusual in a small town in the middle of Massachusetts—to have a marching band come up the street on a fall morning. So I stopped my walking and just listened.

Gradually the marching band transformed into the bumps and rattles and squeaks of a garden cart that was being pushed down a gravel track on two bicycle tires. I thought I had heard a brass band. I was convinced I heard drums and trumpets, horns. And I hadn't. I'd heard a garden cart on bicycle tires. So perception is not always reliable.

But I might have reacted out of thinking there was a brass band coming.

So one of the ways the Buddha said we don't perceive things correctly is that we think things are permanent when they're not. We think things are going to be satisfying when they're not. We think things have a self when they don't. And we think things are really beautiful when they may actually be a little

dangerous. So these are our misperceptions that go on a lot. And part of the difficulty I'd had with my sister's death was some assumption of her permanence, of her continuity, that hadn't taken into account the way she actually was.

So perception is also interesting because sometimes when we put a label on things, we stop seeing it correctly. Notice this if you label something as pain in the body—sometimes that word forms a block and makes it difficult to feel exactly what's there. Or there may be a strong emotion like hurt or regret, and you think, oh, that's either hurt or that's guilt. Maybe the word "guilt" colors it so much you can't get in and actually feel it. So perception can cloud our ability to be with a direct experience. Just to be aware of that.

For example, this big metal thing in front of me—I assume most of you perceive it as a bell because we strike it at the end of sittings and it makes a sound and it's very useful. So you look at it normally, you perceive it as a bell. Could it be a begging bowl? Could there be a big monk or nun who would like to carry it around and have you fill it up with rice and curry? Sure. If you had a big statue, could you turn it upside down on the statue and it'd be a really nice little chapeau? Sure, it could be. If we get attached to the word "bell," we don't see all those possibilities. We don't see the thing just in its bare suchness because the word has conditioned us.

So a Zen koan—they might hold this out, a Zen master might hold it out and say, "What is this? If you say it is a striker, I will hit you. But if you say it is not a striker, I will hit you too." I heard a lot of stories like that, and that's why I ended up in Vipassana instead of Zen. I had a feeling I would get hit a lot.

There was this nice dialogue kind of along these lines. In the late seventies, these two really respected Buddhist teachers came together. They were both in Cambridge, Massachusetts at the same time. One was Kalu Rinpoche, who was a great master in the Tibetan Kagyu lineage. The other was Seungsahn Sunim, who was a Zen master from Korea. Some friends were in touch with them both and thought, wow, it'd be really great to bring these two enlightened beings together. You know those stories about how enlightened beings totally recognize each other's enlightenment—they're just like two mirrors meeting each other, they're both so empty, and there are these tremendous heart openings of recognition for kindred spirits. They thought it would be something like that.

It wasn't.

So they sat them down, they served them tea and put out some fruit for them. And as they were still just settling in and chatting a little bit, Seungsahn Sunim, the Zen master, picked up one of the oranges and held it out to Kalu Rinpoche and said, "What is this?" Because that's the way he was used to checking someone's enlightenment from the Zen tradition. "What is this?"

Kalu just kind of looked at it, smiled a little bit, kept doing his beads—he was doing some mantra on his mala. Seungsahn Sunim didn't get an answer, so he held out the orange again. He said, "What is this?" And

Kalu just turned to his translator and said something, and the translator said, "Oh, Rinpoche asked, don't they have oranges in Korea?"

So it's all about perception, right? It's an interesting story because sometimes cross-culturally, dharma doesn't exactly translate that easily. Even expressions of dharma are culturally conditioned. Helpful to remember.

So this is the area of perception and how it can be sometimes accurate, sometimes not so accurate. The fourth aggregate is volitional formations—mostly thoughts and emotions, movements of mind. And then consciousness, the knowing quality that receives all the different sense objects, that holds them and knows them in that very basic way.

So our human experience is made up of form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

That's it.

Why is that freeing? Why is that significant? Because there's one element there that we think about a lot that's not in that list. There's no "I" in that list. There's nothing in the center that they all belong to. There's nothing in the center that controls them. There's nothing in the center that is the essence of those aggregates. Our experience is just form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

If you want to condense it a little bit and make it more approachable, think of it as three aggregates. Collapse feeling, perception, and formations all together. Call those formations. This makes it more immediate for me. So our experience is: we have a body, we have consciousness that reveals sense objects, and then we have thoughts and emotions, feelings, perceptions, meditative states like calm, concentration, equanimity. These are all the mental formations that happen inside us. This is what a human being is—these three things. There's not a separate self in the middle of all that.

It's kind of like—can anybody see what this is? This is a pen, right? Everybody would agree this is a pen. We have no trouble identifying it and naming it. But suppose I start to take it apart. Suppose I deconstruct the pen for us to look at. Now I've got a cap, I've got a barrel, I've got an end, I've got a cartridge, and I've got a tip. Is this still a pen? Would you call this a pen? It's not really, is it? It's just pieces. When they're put together in a certain way—we put it all back together—then we call it a pen. But when the pieces disassemble, it's no longer a pen.

This is the way it is with a human being. We're so accustomed to seeing these pieces joined that all we can think of is "human being" or "pen." But when we apply meditative insight to our experience, we see that we are only made up of these different pieces. They are not intrinsically bound together.

This is what my sister's death revealed. Her formations and her consciousness were not intrinsically bound to her form. At death, they separated. That's what I hadn't understood before. I thought they were intrinsically bound as one thing. But in death, the pieces come apart. And then we understand the human

being is made up of different pieces. It's not just one thing.

So we still use the pen. It's still quite useful. I can describe it to you. It's a ballpoint pen. It's gray and black in its barrel, and it writes with black ink. It's a medium tip. That's a useful designation. It's useful to know that. But we don't deceive ourselves that the pen is one substantial entity. We see how it's just been put together. It's a collection of pieces that we conventionally designate as pen.

So this is what we want to see about ourselves. We're a collection of pieces—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. That's all.

But when you really look at it honestly, we feel ourselves to be relatively permanent and substantial. We expect to continue in some recognizable form. We expect to be happy if we arrange things properly. We think of ourselves as unified and coherent. And we feel ourselves to be fundamentally separate from the rest of the universe—that I am here and you are there, and there's some basic separation between us.

These are the assumptions we operate from, but they're all contrary to what investigation reveals. When we look closely, we see that everything is impermanent. We see that trying to make impermanent things give us lasting satisfaction is a recipe for suffering. We see that what we call "self" is actually multiple processes happening simultaneously. And we see that these processes are deeply interconnected with everything else.

So the spiritual path is really about coming to see clearly what's actually happening, rather than operating from our unconscious assumptions about what's happening. It's about waking up to reality as it actually is, rather than continuing to live in the story we tell ourselves about reality.

The Buddha's insight was that when we see clearly—when we see the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty nature of all phenomena—we naturally stop grasping at them so tightly. We stop trying to extract permanent satisfaction from impermanent things. And in that letting go, there's tremendous freedom and peace.

This doesn't mean we become nihilistic or that nothing matters. Remember, conventional designation is still useful. We still say "pen" and we still say "Sally." We still take care of our health and pay our bills and love our friends. But we hold it all more lightly. We're not desperately trying to solidify and protect something that was never solid to begin with.

You know, I'm a male, I'm a certain age, I'm a certain height, I have this background and these characteristics and this conditioning. It kind of makes up this person. We think that.

But we attribute some things to the self that are over and above that. The central one is we attribute continuity. We think that there's some permanence or ongoing nature to this thing we call I. A simple question: don't you feel like the same person now who went to third grade? If you link up all your memories, doesn't it feel like you've been there for all those years? Or just over the course of this retreat,

don't you feel like the same person who walked in the door a couple of weeks ago? Well, of course you feel different in many ways, but there's this continuity we attribute to self.

If we didn't have this assumption of continuity, you wouldn't be afraid of dying. We're afraid of dying because we see the continuity coming to an end. What's going to die? Me. Me is going to continue up to the point of death, but then there's this cliff that ends it. And that's scary to me, because the assumption is the me no longer continues then.

The second thing is that we feel ourselves at the center of experience, and in a way, separate from the experience. When we say something like "I have joys," we feel ourselves separate from the experience of the joy. "I have sorrows"—we feel ourselves separate from the experience of the sorrows. So there's this assumption of a self in the middle of everything. That's actually, if you look at it closely, an identification with the fifth aggregate of consciousness. It's consciousness that receives joys. It's consciousness that receives sorrows. And when we identify with consciousness, then we say, "I am receiving joy. I am receiving sorrow."

We think that we should be unitary, right? The self should be unitary. Otherwise, how many selves do you think you are? Usually people who think they're more than one self—somebody calls the paramedics for them. This is not generally considered a sign of mental health. So we think we're one, not many. So are you both your liver and your compassion? How many selves are we? Liver, compassion, toenail, perception, pleasant feeling tone, joy, eyeballs.

And we think we should be unique, right? My self is different from your self. Some of the aggregates fail on this count. We'll get to that in a minute.

So just think about this body. If we claim it as I or mine, we can either have a lot of pride about that or we can have a certain amount of embarrassment, even shame. We maybe don't really want the body that we've got. But did you have anything to do with how it came out? Did you choose it? Did you shape it? You know, by diet, by exercise, by healthcare, we have a little bit of influence, but did you choose how tall you are? How broad your shoulders are? Whether you're dark or fair? We didn't choose any of that.

What did? Well, our father's sperm met our mother's egg. They connected. They lived in the womb for nine months. The cells multiplied and specialized. Something popped out into the world. It was nourished by milk and water and food and air and sunlight. And it grew, grew, grew.

Here it stands today, totally beyond our control. This body is simply a physical process that initiated at the moment of conception and has unfolded into what we see now. Can you really take responsibility for how it has turned out? Yet we do this constantly, don't we? We assign "I" to the body and feel either proud or embarrassed about its appearance or condition.

Actually, this form is completely beyond our control because the body is simply part of physical nature. It's nature itself that has done this work—not our will, not our choice. This body is the result of processes

within physical nature.

One of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, expressed this beautifully. He said, "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."

You can understand emotions in the same way. Emotions are simply part of mental nature. Every human being has the same range of emotions—we all experience fear and joy, anger and happiness, sadness and contentment. We all have access to this complete spectrum. This emotional range is simply part of the mental nature that accompanies being human, so we don't need to claim these feelings as "I" or "mine."

Consciousness itself is a particularly interesting faculty because it too is just nature—part of mental nature. What makes it especially intriguing is why it doesn't make sense to identify with consciousness either. One common approach is to say, "I am just the observer," or in more sophisticated meditation terms, "I am vast awareness. Everything comes and goes within me. I am not the comings and goings—I am the vast awareness that holds it all."

This could become a philosophical view, but that awareness isn't actually different between you and me and everyone else. That awareness is fundamentally the same. Since there's nothing unique in it, there's nothing that can be called a separate self, a distinct "I."

So the sense of "I" is not intrinsic. How then is it generated?

Shortly after Ananda ordained—he was the Buddha's cousin and attendant for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life, very close to him—another monk was giving Ananda instruction. This monk told him, "It is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging. And by clinging to what does 'I am' arise? By clinging to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness."

This is a profound observation. The "I" isn't present until we cling to one of the aggregates. It's this grasping hold of a part of our experience that constructs the "I" and gives us that sense of self.

The Buddha expressed this in similar terms. When asked how the belief in a self comes to be, he said, "An untaught ordinary person"—this is a key phrase from his teaching, referring to someone who hasn't heard the Dharma, hasn't understood its pointing—"regards form as self." This would be like saying, "I am the body."

Or self as possessing form—"I am the owner of the body."

Or form in self—"The body is part of me." You might think this makes sense if you believe you're the vast awareness and the body is part of that vast awareness, so the body becomes part of you.

Or self is in form—"I'm really inside the body, inside the head, looking out at everything that's happening."

These represent four ways of identifying with form alone. You can multiply this by five for all five

aggregates, giving us twenty different ways we construct a sense of self. I'll let you work through the other sixteen on your own.

You have another two weeks or a month to explore this, so continue your investigation.

But more simply, the "I" gets built when we grasp at any phenomenon at a sense door. A simple example: let's say there's a pain in the knee while you're sitting. If you're just very clear and mindful, you'll simply note "unpleasant sensation." But if grasping comes upon it—maybe there's some fear, some worry, some frustration—you go, "My knee hurts." The "my" is extra. Even the "knee" is extra, truth to tell. All you really know is unpleasant sensation.

But when we turn to it and go, "Oh, that's my knee and that's my pain," we create a sense of self that wasn't there before. So that's the turning toward and taking hold of something out of some kind of fear or desire, generally.

You can take a look at this with any experience at the sense doors where you start hearing the word "I" or "my." For instance, some fear arises and the thought is, "Oh, that's my old pattern." That's a form of grasping and a form of identifying—it links through time, creating a belief about the self: "I'm the owner of that old pattern."

So what if the fear just arose and all you knew was fear, and there was no "I" or "my" connected? Then the sense of self isn't arising.

This momentary grasping and creating a sense of "I" or "my" is the activity that we call *selfing*. We construct a self moment by moment when we take hold of something and claim it. That's all. If you don't do that, sense of self never has to arise.

So this is the Buddha continuing: "Therefore, all form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

When there's no grasping and self is not created, how does that feel? If you've had that insight or that understanding, it feels good, doesn't it? It feels open, spacious, peaceful, free, easy.

This is a very interesting place to examine and pay attention to in meditation practice. When is the mind simply open, receiving sense impressions at the six sense doors, and when does grasping take place that claims one of those—driven by greed or aversion typically? Then contraction comes in. Then struggle comes in. Conflict comes in. The self comes in—sense of self.

Notice for yourself: when are things free of that sense of self? How does that feel? And then when does a grasping moment take place that gives birth to a sense of self? It's very helpful to notice.

This opening of the door to seeing not-self is not a cold intellectual experience. When we are able to see without the contraction of self, the world is more open, the heart is more open, and we feel less burdened.

We feel lighter, easier, without that pressure.

Jack Kornfield tells this story of visiting an old monk in Sri Lanka when he was still a monk. He was a young guy and a Westerner, and the monk thought, "Well, I'll check this young monk out." The monk said, "Oh, what do you understand as the central teaching of the Buddha?" And Jack said, "Well, my understanding of the central teaching is that there really is no self within the field of our experience—no separate self." And the monk said, "Oh, very good!" He said, "No self, no problem! No problem!" And he just started laughing.

So this is the experience of no-self. Check it out. Take a look in your own practice and see what it feels like when this grasping insistence isn't happening.

This kind of makes sense of this famous saying of Nisargadatta Maharaj, whom I quoted earlier. You may have heard it before. He said, "Love tells me I'm everything. Wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows."

So please let the metta carry you to this connected feeling with everything.

Please let vipassana carry you to this wisdom of not being anything particular.

Let's just sit for a minute.

In this gentle space between everything and nothing, we find the true flow of our lives. When metta opens us to the boundless connection with all that is, and vipassana reveals the transparent nature of what we think we are, we discover a profound freedom. This is not the freedom to be something special, but the freedom from needing to be anything at all.

The practice invites us into this delicate dance—embracing our interconnectedness while simultaneously releasing our grip on any fixed sense of self. In this release, we don't become diminished or lost. Rather, we become available to the natural unfolding of each moment, no longer trapped by the exhausting project of maintaining and defending a particular identity.

This is where wisdom and love meet—not in grand philosophical understanding, but in the lived experience of letting go while remaining fully present. Between the poles of everything and nothing, life simply flows, and we flow with it, no longer swimming against the current of reality.

The invitation is simple: let your practice carry you to these discoveries again and again. Allow metta to dissolve the barriers between self and other, and let vipassana reveal the spacious awareness that remains when all our constructions fall away. In this place, the heart naturally opens, and wisdom naturally arises—not as something we achieve, but as what we already are when we stop trying so hard to be something else.

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