The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:42

The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

The subject of tonight's talk is the five aggregates are not self. I'll be exploring two aspects: first, the formula or model of the five aggregates used to describe our human experience, which I'll introduce and explain; and second, how this relates to the teaching on not-self, one of the central and most powerful teachings that the Buddha offered, unique in his time.

This teaching on not-self—*anatta* in Pali—is often paired with impermanence and unsatisfactoriness as the three characteristics of all existent things, summed up as *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*. This is one of the central pointings in the Buddha's teachings, and a place where, as we come to understand it, we can experience a great degree of freedom even short of enlightenment. I believe this is one of the most liberating insights available to us before full awakening.

But it's also one of the hardest to understand. So don't worry if it doesn't all make sense tonight. I simply want to introduce some of the concepts. This is a theme that we need to live with over years of dharma practice and meditation. It cannot be understood purely on a conceptual or intellectual level. The understanding of it relies on meditative insight, which in turn relies on the stilling of the mind and a strong degree of presence and concentration—qualities you are all developing in this long retreat.

This understanding needs a combination of inquiry and reflection, which are rational activities, and the meditative balance and stability that can begin to see the truth of what the Buddha was pointing toward. This is something we investigate over time, and it deepens in understanding gradually. If these concepts are new to you, don't try to think them through too hard tonight. Rather, let the general approach sink in, as it will take time to integrate.

Also notice if there's any resistance to hearing this, because you may have a little attachment to the self—we all might. This teaching undermines one of the central building blocks of our psychology, so notice if there's a little unease with that. That's perfectly natural.

Very interestingly, the Buddha said that the sense of self we carry, which reveals itself constantly through words like "I," "me," and "mine," is not intrinsic to the experience of being human. Rather, it is something generated out of our beliefs and views. An interesting question to explore through this talk is: What is our experience when the sense of self is being generated? What does that feel like? And what is the experience we have when the sense of self isn't being generated? The Buddha said these are very different human experiences.

Child psychologists tell us that when an infant comes into the world, it has a very expansive sense of the world, or you could say self. The division between self and world is not so strong; the infant experiences things through an oceanic sense of connectedness. Then as we grow up—even in childhood years and certainly by teens and early adulthood—that oceanic sense has dwindled down and the sense of self has become quite narrow.

This restriction in our sense of what's happening brings suffering with it—inevitable suffering. As we crystallize out of this whole field of experience, we crystallize a sense of what we are and what we're not. That leads to a duality with the world. Creating self also creates other. Once we create a self and differentiate it from what we call "other," then we become separated and isolated. That separation is one of the deep sources of our unhappiness when we believe it thoroughly.

This crystallization into self also leads to a deep-seated anxiety, sometimes a strong fear, because of the imminence of death. We see this self that we have cherished and been concerned about, protected and fed and defended, coming to an end at some future date. As long as we believe in the reality of that self, death is going to be a fearful experience in one way or another. So one possible development and freedom in understanding not-self is becoming much more comfortable with the possibility of death and removing some of the fear that we normally carry.

The self tends to have many concerns. When we dwell on those concerns, we become more separated, more isolated, and in general, more fretful and worried. This strong belief in the self leads us into different kinds of suffering and provides, I would say, the root of our basic fearfulness in approaching life.

There's a wonderful Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj whose teachings were collected in a book called *I Am That*, which I highly recommend. He was a Vedanta teacher who died in the 1990s and taught in Bombay. He made this comment (and in this context, "yoga" is simply a generic term for spiritual discipline—he taught in the Vedanta tradition, but in his view, Buddhism would be considered one of the yogas): "All yogas have only one aim, that is to save you from the calamity of separate existence."

This is where we find ourselves now. We are all embroiled in the calamity of separate existence. The teachings of the Buddha and the possibility of liberation show us the way out of that calamity of belief in separate existence.

When we open to what is beyond self, we find ourselves opening to a way of being that's much wider, broader, more inclusive, open, kind, generous, thoughtful, and loving. This is the promise of opening up the restricted sense of self that we have built ourselves into—something not intrinsic to our human nature.

For most of us, this sense of self is the center that everything revolves around. You can simply notice how often the terms "I," "me," "my," and "mine" come into your thinking. Even on retreat when we're not relating much to others, these make up the content of our drifting thoughts much of the time.

So the self becomes the focus of our thoughts, our speech, our actions, our decisions, our emotions, values, directions, purpose. It's like the North Star that everything else revolves around in our world when we're not seeing through it. It seems, to use a phrase, self-evident.

But have you ever found it? This is quite curious, isn't it? It seems like the most obvious fact of our existence. Have you ever located it? William James, the philosopher, said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." That was good. That's a good start. Most of us can't locate it anywhere.

The Dalai Lama said that when you think something is real but you can't find it, that's a sign of delusion. So this belief in self is one of the most fundamental delusions that we have. In the texts it's compared to walking down a path in the woods and seeing something brown coiled up and believing it's a snake. One jumps back in alarm in the belief that it's a snake. But as you get closer and look at it more precisely, you see it's just a coil of rope.

So the understanding about self is like that. When we're burdened with the belief that the self is something real, we live with fear and anxiety, separation and isolation. When we examine it more closely and those beliefs dissolve, we can relax much more into the flow of life as a process of nature. When our perception is refined and corrected, we see that there's just the process of nature going on.

We can look at our language to see some of the confusion we have around this sense of "I." We've grown up as children in this culture, and the words get tossed around a lot—I, me, mine—but without real clarity about what they're pointing to. So as children, we absorb the language of the culture, and it's led us to believe that there's something real and precise being pointed to with these words. This isn't necessarily the case, and I would call this confusion the faulty logic of "I." Things aren't necessarily the way they seem.

Let me ask some questions that might draw some of this out. Suppose I were to ask how old you are. This is a really simple one to answer. So I'd say I'm 68. In saying "I'm 68," which doesn't strike an odd note for any of us, the question is: what is 68? Are my thoughts 68? Is my mood 68? Is my hair 68? No, generally the body is 68, right? It came out of the womb 68 years ago. So here we're equating "I" with the body. We're basically saying "I'm 68," meaning the body's 68, so we're saying I am the body.

Now let me ask you: what color are your eyes? So I'd say my eyes are brown. Now the "I" is not being equated with the eyes, but the "I" is being equated with the owner of the eyes. They're my eyes. That implies that the "I" is something that stands apart from the body and possesses it. So which are you really? Are you the body or are you the owner of the body? Can you be both? Does that really make sense? How many selves are you?

We can do the same thing with emotion. Sometimes we say, "I'm happy, I'm sad." Here we're equating the "I" with the emotion. I am happy. At other times we talk about my joys and sorrows. There we become the owner of the emotion. So are you the emotion? Are you the owner of it? Again, can you be both?

Or here's another one. This is what I felt for years to be most essentially who I am. I felt there was a little observer inside the head.

Behind my eyes and between my ears, there was a witnessing presence looking out at everything unfolding—seeing sights, hearing sounds, thinking thoughts, making choices. This felt like the real me. Let's call this the observer—the one at the center of everything, experiencing it all. Have you found that one?

How many of you have practiced Goenka-style body scanning? Quite a few. Have you spent considerable time investigating sensations and experiences in the head? Ever find a little person in there? That's what it feels like—as though the essence of who I am is this little being inside, looking out and experiencing everything. I never found one.

So that's the fifth way we conceive of "I," and there's another I'll mention later. Can all of these be true? Can all of these point to something that actually exists? The Buddha would say no, and he said this quite explicitly: "In whatever way one conceives of self, the truth is ever other than that."

This is worth remembering. However we conceive of self, the truth is always different from our conception. It's interesting that this verb "conceive" is closely related in Pali to the quality of conceit—*māna*—that Bonnie discussed the other night. So conceiving of self and the conceit she described are intimately connected. One way to understand *māna* is as the way we conceive that we are a self, that we are something particular.

One of my teachers put it even more bluntly: "Everything you think is wrong." That's quite a wake-up call—everything you think is wrong, especially regarding self-view and self-image. It reminds me of something I heard on talk radio. I don't listen to much talk radio—I think it's rather chaotic in this country—but here's an incisive observation: "The mind, often wrong, seldom in doubt."

We need to question these assumptions, particularly around this concept of self. Something deluded is happening here, and undoing this deception is one of the primary aspects of Buddhist meditation practice.

So how did the Buddha see? If we attune ourselves to his way of seeing and describing us, we can approach a more awakened understanding of what's actually occurring.

When you and I look around this hall, I'm guessing we mostly see persons—a person here, a person there. Around the hall we see persons. When the Buddha looked at someone, I don't think he primarily saw a person. I think he saw more precisely than that.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, a fifth-century text that compiled many of the meditation techniques and understandings current in Sri Lankan monasteries, the commentator monk Buddhaghosa offers an analogy. Though I'm uncomfortable with it as a longtime vegetarian who deeply cares about animals, it comes from the old text, so I'll share it. He said that when a butcher carves up a cow's carcass for meat, the

butcher isn't thinking "cow, cow, cow." Being intimately familiar with anatomy, he thinks "rump, tenderloin, sirloin, ribs"—his understanding is more refined.

Similarly, when the Buddha saw us, I don't think he primarily saw a person. I think he perceived something more fundamental, more detailed. In the teachings, he described a person in one of two ways. The first is what Joseph mentioned a few mornings ago: the six sense bases. Remember Joseph saying something like "there are only ever six things happening"?

This comes from a discourse in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* called the "Discourse on Totality." It asks: "Bhikkhus, what is the totality of things?" This is quite a bold statement. I don't know many Western philosophers who have made such a claim—certainly not Freud.

I don't think Marx said this. I don't think Einstein said this. But here's the Buddha: "Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of things. It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality of things would not be speaking of something they knew about."

I love this because it's really simple, and it's really true, isn't it? When we look at our experience, that's all that's there—the sense base and the sense object. This also maps beautifully onto our meditation practice. Vipassana practice is concerned with mindfulness of these six objects as they arise and pass at the sense doors. So this is a good field map for meditators. The Buddha used this formula frequently when he talked about cutting through craving, because we generate desire for pleasant experience in each of these six modes of the senses.

But there's another format that the Buddha used just as often in his teachings, and that is the model of the five aggregates. It's another way to describe the totality of things, but it divides them up differently. And he used this teaching device to cut through wrong view, particularly the wrong view that concerns the belief in self. So that's why we're going to talk about this tonight—the five aggregates as a way of seeing through the self.

When we start to see through the model of the five aggregates, we see people the way the Buddha saw them. And that means we see them without the false overlay of self. And first, of course, we start to see ourself without that false overlay.

This sounds quite technical. You know, "aggregate" is a technical term, and as we get into the five, they may seem unfamiliar. But to me, this is not just an idle philosophical conversation. I got very interested in this scheme when one of my older sisters died. She was 51 at the time—I'm five years younger than she was. She'd been ill for a while, but she was very functional in her life, still raising children, and she was not anywhere near a life-threatening disease.

But one night at home, she came down with something very quickly. Consciousness was fading, she

suffered cardiac arrest, and the medical technicians could not pull her through. So she basically died that night quite unexpectedly, with one of her sons in the house with her at the time.

I heard the news the next day, and it hit me very strongly because I'd been talking to her on the phone just a few days before. She was someone I was close with—we had a very good relationship. And she was somebody I enjoyed a lot. She had a big personality, a great sense of humor, a big laugh. She liked to have fun. She was passionate in both directions—she could also get upset about things. But when she was in the room, you knew it. So much vitality.

For that to have gone on for the 46 years that I'd known her and then come to such an abrupt stop was something I couldn't comprehend. She had been so full and so alive a few days earlier, and then she was just gone.

I'm sure most of you have had this experience with the puzzle, the real mystery of death. How can someone who is so alive all of a sudden just be gone? What has happened?

So I began investigating this as I lived with the grief that touched me for a while. There were a couple of months where I would go into grieving spaces and come out a little bit, then go back into darkness and come out a little bit, reflecting on the Dharma implications of this. The model I used to understand what had happened to her was the five aggregates. It helped me a great deal to understand as much as I could of the mystery of her death. And in doing that, it helped me come to much greater peace around her dying, but also around my own dying, because I came to understand how this being has been put together. I'll say more about that later in the talk.

The Pali word for the aggregates is *khanda*—a simple word.

that just means heap or bundle. You could talk about a khandha of twigs or branches or something like that. We translate it with the word aggregate because that's the way it's been used for a long time, but that sounds too technical to me. Aggregate sounds like road paving material, like what they're going to be doing out on Pleasant Street in hopefully a few days. Another way you could say it is components. There are five components that make us up. But even that sounds a little technical, so what I like is "kinds of stuff." There are these five kinds of stuff that make us up. And that's really how I take it. But I'll use the word aggregate because in Buddhism it's become very common.

So the five aggregates are material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. This is what makes up a being. I want to go through each one and talk about how we can find them and feel them in our direct experience.

Form—the Pali term is rupa—means all material form. All the matter that you see in the universe goes into this one aggregate. Our bodies, other bodies, the floor, the trees, the forest, the earth—this is all part of the material form aggregate. Not only that, but the sense objects that come from physical interactions are also part of material form. Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations are all part of that material

form aggregate. You could say this is the physical world, including the physical sense objects in our experience. For example, that sound is in the realm of rupa, one of the physical sense objects that's part of rupa.

The second aggregate is feeling tone. You know this is vedanā. We covered it—I think Carol covered it in the meditation instructions a few days ago. This is the quality that every sense contact has of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. You'll remember that the feeling tone, as Carol described it, is a mental component because the same physical experience doesn't translate for everybody with the same degree of pleasantness or unpleasantness.

For example, beets. We had beets, I think it was yesterday at lunch. I saw a lot of people helping themselves very happily to the serving of beets. I didn't take any because I don't like beets. And now that my mother isn't around anymore, I don't have to eat them. Some people really love the flavor of beets. To me, they taste like dirt and it's not very pleasant. And I don't have to eat them anymore.

The feeling tone is a mental quality that gets projected onto the physical experience. In that way, as one teacher described, it's kind of like we feel our way into our experience of the thing. The feeling tone is mental, even though the object is physical. For instance, with the sound of the bell—generally, most people here would experience that as a pleasant tone, just in and of itself. But because it marks the end of the sitting, it's really a pleasant tone. That is generally felt as pleasant, but not everybody might.

The third aggregate is perception. Again, all the rest are going to be in the mental field because rupa has taken in the whole physical world. Perception is another feature of mind, and it refers to our ability to recognize objects and place them in a category that we've known previously. As you look around the room, quite automatically, the mind is putting things into categories of recognition. You will see woman, man, zafu, mat, floor, tree, statue, light, chair, and so on. This happens pretty automatically. You don't have to think about it a lot. But you recognize the things that are here because you've seen them before and you've put them in a category and then you remember that.

Perception is based on memory, on prior cognition. It's a re-cognition of something you've known before. We think it just happens automatically, but in fact we've learned to perceive. It happens without our thinking about it now, but it might not have happened that way. The neurologist Oliver Sacks tells a story of a patient that he was working with. The man's name was Virgil.

Virgil had lost his sight when he was very young, perhaps as a child. But as he grew up, surgical techniques were developed that could restore vision. So in early middle age, Virgil underwent surgery to regain his sight. Sacks was consulting with the surgeon, and the momentous occasion arrived when Virgil lay in his hospital bed, about to have the bandages removed from his eyes so he could see again.

Everyone expected this to be a moment of pure joy. They imagined Virgil would exclaim with delight at being able to see once more. But when the surgeon peeled back the bandages, something quite different

happened. Let me read from Sacks' account of what occurred:

"No cry, 'I can see!' burst from Virgil's lips. 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 me 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, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blue came a voice that said, 'Well?' Then and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face, and indeed the face of his surgeon."

Because Virgil had lost his sight so young, he had never been able to wire his brain to process visual information and perceive the objects of sight. As Joseph mentioned, what's really happening in sight are just patches of form and color. You can see this more clearly if you close one eye—if you reduce the visual field to two dimensions, it becomes much clearer that patches of form and color are all that's actually there. But we've learned to recognize those patches as different objects. Virgil never had that learning.

By the time he was older, those neural circuits were much harder to establish. Virgil did learn, with considerable training, to recognize and perceive a number of things in his world, but there were many things he never learned to perceive fluently. He lived the rest of his life at a perceptual disadvantage.

This illustrates the nature of perception, and one of the things that's particularly challenging about it is that we don't always perceive accurately. The Buddha described these inaccuracies of seeing as distortions, both in perception and in view, calling them *vipallāsas*. Someone may give a talk on this later, but he taught that we tend to see things as permanent when they're not, to see things as offering lasting happiness when they can't, to see things as being a self when they're not, and to see things as beautiful when they're actually somewhat dangerous. These are distortions of perception that we gradually unlearn through meditation.

As an example of perception's limitations, consider when you have a sensation in your leg. If you immediately label it with the word "pain," that perception can hold you back from meeting that sensation freshly and exploring it without fear. If you explore it without fear, you might discover it's perfectly okay to experience. But as soon as we call something pain, we might hold back. Or we might not see things quite as they are if we perceive something and think we've understood it completely.

For instance, we see this bell, and because we're familiar with it, we normally think, "Oh, it's a bell"—and that's the end of it. But could this be a begging bowl for a well-appointed monk or nun? Certainly, that would work quite well. Could you see this turned upside down as a charming little hat on a statue of appropriate size? Yes, that might be rather nice. Could it be a flower pot? It would be expensive for a flower pot, but it would make a beautiful one.

We want to be able to look at things as they are without necessarily burdening them with conceptual overlays. Zen makes quite a lot of this point. You may know about the koans in Zen tradition. The Zen

master will say, "What is this?" If you say it is a stick, I will hit you. If you say it is not a stick, I will hit you.

That's actually why I ended up in Vipassana—I figured if I went to Zen, I'd get hit a lot.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 7/12). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

So I came to the softer school.

There's a delightful story about this. In the late seventies, two really venerable masters were both in Cambridge at the same time, giving teachings. Some of their students knew one another, and when they discovered the other teacher was in town, they thought, "Let's bring these two enlightened masters together. We'll have this wonderful encounter where enlightened mind meets enlightened mind and recognizes itself—like an empty mirror looking into an empty mirror. And we'll all get enlightened too!"

So they brought together the Tibetan master Kalu Rinpoche and the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn. They invited them into a friend's home, offered them tea, and set out a platter of fruit. Both masters were sipping tea and conversing through translators.

Seung Sahn thought, "Okay, I'm going to check this fellow out." He picked up an orange from the fruit plate, held it toward Kalu Rinpoche, and asked in his good Zen master voice, "What is this?"

Kalu just sat there doing his beads, saying his mantra and moving through the mala, smiling a little, very peaceful. He didn't reply.

Seung Sahn wanted an answer, so he held it out again. "What is this?"

Kalu quietly turned to his translator, who then said to the group, "Rinpoche asks, 'Don't they have oranges in Korea?'"

Apparently nobody got enlightened that night.

It's a wonderful story about perception—you never quite know how it's going to turn out.

When you hear the sound of the bell, you normally recognize it as the bell ending a sitting, so you know it's time to get up. This perception happens automatically. That's recognition at work.

The fourth aggregate is called mental formations, sometimes called volitional formations to emphasize that intention is involved. I don't want to go into great detail tonight, but you'll recognize that intention is central to the Buddha's teaching. Based on Winnie's instruction and Sally's dharma talk from a couple nights ago, intentions are key to the formation of karma. The intentional aspect is important in the fourth aggregate, though we won't spend much time on that tonight.

Mental formations encompass thoughts, moods, emotions, and meditative states of mind. We've been discussing these extensively in the meditation instructions, so you're familiar with how to know them and

practice with them.

When you hear the bell at the end of a sit, you may think, "Oh, the sitting's over." A feeling of ease may arise, followed by the thought, "Now I could sit forever"—you know, like a moment before the bell rings when you can't wait for it to end, and as soon as it rings, you think you could sit forever. These emotional or volitional formations that arise upon hearing the bell are mental formations. In Pali, the term is *sankha ra*.

The fifth aggregate is fascinating. It's called consciousness—*vijnana* in Pali. We haven't explored it much during this retreat, but it's very interesting to investigate in your direct experience.

Consciousness means many different things in Western philosophy and psychology, but in Buddhism, the meaning is fairly simple. Consciousness is the faculty of mind that reveals, holds, receives—or best put, *kn ows*—sense objects. When you hear a sound, you're a conscious being, so the hearing takes place for you as sentient experience.

If the bell rang in the forest and nobody was around, would it make a sound? Depends how you define sound, right? The sound wave would be created, but if no being were there to receive it, there would be no conscious experience of hearing.

What we all have when the bell rings is a conscious experience of hearing. The sound is being known by our consciousness. Each of us receives it in consciousness.

Consciousness reveals the bare data of that *mmm*—before it knows it's a bell, before it knows it's A-sharp, before it even recognizes it as a sound. Consciousness knows that *mmm* and reveals it to us.

Consciousness is present in each moment. It has revealed the sound, revealed the feeling tone, revealed the perception that it's a bell, revealed the feeling of ease at the end of sitting, revealed the thought "Now I could sit forever." Consciousness is there with each of the other aggregates too.

Consciousness is this basic cognition happening all the time while we're awake. It's what marks a sentient being. Birds have consciousness.

Dogs have consciousness. Insects have consciousness. And humans have this kind of consciousness.

So these are the five aggregates that describe our human experience: form, feeling tone, perception, formations, and consciousness.

Something to explore—we won't do it right now, but for you to explore—is there anything in your experience that's outside this list of five kinds of stuff? Is there anything else going on? It's kind of important that you do that review to convince yourself that everything that's happening is in one of these five categories. But I'll leave you to do that.

And I'm just going to say, I think you'll find that it's complete. The Buddha thought it was complete. I think

you'll find it's complete.

But why is this important? Because in our whole experience, there's only form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. There's nothing else. In particular, there's a kind of important noun that isn't on this list, and that is self. There's no I on this list. There's no me, there's no self. There's only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. That describes the whole thing.

So there is no one at the center to whom these are all happening. There's no owner of these kinds of stuff. There's no controller of these kinds of stuff. There are only these kinds of stuff.

And in fact, one of those versions of the self that we talked about—remember that the one who's sitting at the center in the head, looking out, seeing sights, hearing sounds, thinking thoughts—that is only an identification with consciousness. That's basically saying, I am the experiencer. I am the knower of all these things. Consciousness is doing the knowing. But we identify with that and say, oh, I'm the knower. I'm the observer. But it's just an identification with consciousness.

So there are only these five things. And what's the relationship to the human being?

Probably most of you can see the item I'm holding up is just a common pen. It's a ballpoint pen. Everybody can recognize that. It's a physical object. It's in the area of rupa. And your knowing it as a pen is simply a perception—it's a commonly agreed thing.

But I can take this pen apart. So as I take it apart, there's a tip, there's a cartridge, there's a spring, and there's a cap. Now I'm holding up these four parts. Is this a pen? It's not a pen anymore, is it?

To make a pen, I have to take these four parts and fit them together in a way that it can be used for writing something. Now that I put it back together, everybody says, oh yeah, now it's a pen.

Pen doesn't point to any one thing. The word pen is just a conventional designation that points to an assembly of certain parts put together in a certain way.

The word human being doesn't point to any one thing. It only points to a collection of aggregates that have been put together and assembled in a certain way that works.

Another way to say it is in the center of all the components of pen, there is no one thing that is a little pen. In the center of the collection of all the parts that is each of you, there is no one thing that is the essence of you. It's just an assemblage of parts that put together in this way work in the way that they work.

So to say human being is just a conventional designation. To say Guy or Sally or Winnie is just a conventional designation. When you look closely to what is being pointed at, it's just a collection of parts.

This was the part that was so freeing in investigating my sister's death. I had assumed that her personality, which is mostly these mental formations—you know, her sense of humor, her kindness, her irritability, her love for her family—I had assumed her personality and her form were one.

That was a mistaken perception. It was almost accidental that that personality and that body had come together. When I saw that, when I could separate them, I could see how when life ended, the body remained. Whatever the personality was, that had gone on. That was not there any longer. But the separation of those two components wasn't so startling anymore.

This let me see how my death was going to happen. What I took as my personality was going to get separated from this body. All these components that we have assembled here are conditioned, and we need to look in and see that conditioned nature and its limitations.

The Buddha addressed this directly in one of his discourses. You probably know his first discourse was the Four Noble Truths. One of the people he delivered it to—a group of five old friends who had practiced with him—got partially enlightened from that first discourse. Then a couple of weeks later, they all practiced together. The Buddha gave his second discourse, called "The Characteristic of Not-Self." When he delivered this second discourse, all five of them became fully enlightened.

This characteristic of not-self is significant. The first five arahants in the world after the Buddha were created from a discourse like this one—probably a little better than this one.

The Buddha was asking about the five aggregates. He said, "This body, is it permanent or impermanent?" Of course they knew. They said, "It's impermanent, venerable sir." So the Buddha said, "What is impermanent—is it going to give you lasting happiness, or at some point is it going to become unsatisfying?" They said, "At some point it becomes unsatisfying because it changes, venerable sir."

So the Buddha said, "Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine. This I am. This is myself'?" You might remember this line from Bonnie's talk the other night, because "This I am" is the pointer to māna—conceiving oneself. In other words, why would you put yourself onto something that is going to change and is not going to give lasting happiness? That's not a good bet.

Then the Buddha went through the same series of questions with feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. At the end, the practitioners had all been led to investigate their body, their feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness, and realized that none of them were fit to be regarded as "This is mine. This I am. This is myself."

In that recognition, there was a great letting go. In that great letting go, their minds opened to the unconditioned and they were enlightened on the spot.

This is an important investigation because self is not just a neutral concept without associations. Self has assumptions embedded in it that constrict us. There are three or four really important assumptions we carry about the self that we haven't investigated.

One is that it has continuity. That's why in some way we feel like the same person now as the one who

went through high school or the one who entered the door two weeks ago to join this retreat. We feel in some way it's the same me through all those different experiences of life. If we didn't feel that sense of continuity, we wouldn't worry about death, because death would be happening to somebody else. It wouldn't be happening to me. That would be a different person then. Oh, that person can deal with it—I don't have to worry about it. But we do worry about death because we assume this continuity of the self over time.

A second thing is we think there's just one self. When you ask about where your self is, how many different ones do you expect to come up with? It's really just one, isn't it? People who really think there are two or three or four—usually we call the medics for them, because that's considered not very healthy mentally.

Then also we feel our self should be unique. I'm unique in this whole created universe. There's only one like me.

You have your own unique self and I have my own unique self. But each of us is very different in that self piece. Yet when we examine this more closely, we begin to see the contradictions.

Seeing that the aggregates are all impermanent destroys the illusion of continuity—there is no real continuity to a human being. And as we investigate the aggregates, we'll see that clearly. Nagarjuna, who's the preeminent Buddhist philosopher of emptiness, said: "If mind and matter were me, I would come and go like them." So if you really think you are these aggregates, then you need to feel yourself arising and passing moment after moment. But we don't, because we assume that the I is ongoing.

You have to think that the self is unitary. So how can you be both the liver and compassion? How can you be the toenail and loving-kindness? Those are really different pieces. How can that be one self? It doesn't make sense.

And you have to assume that you're unique. Is your love really different from my love? Is your anger really different from your friend's anger? And what about consciousness? But we'll get to that in a moment.

So first of all, let's think about this body. We want to explore the aggregates and their conditioned nature.

First we'll think about this body and how it came to be this way. As Bonnie said in her talk the other night, we can have definite mana about our appearance. We can have pride about our appearance or we can be embarrassed about our appearance. But when you think of it, did you have anything to do with your appearance?

Overall—okay, diet, exercise, health care, how you cut your hair—that makes a little bit of impact. But did you have anything to do with your overall appearance? How tall you are or how short, whether you're dark or fair, whether your shoulders are broad or narrow? Did you have a say in any of that? Did you

choose by volition any of that?

Well, let's review how this thing got here. Your father's sperm met your mother's egg. They joined. The cells multiplied and specialized within the womb. Nine months later, something popped out into the world. It got milk and water and food and air. It grew, grew, grew, grew, grew. And then it's here today.

Did you have a choice in any of that? So why do we take so much responsibility for it? It's just a physical process. The whole thing was a physical process from the moment of conception until now. Our choice had nothing to do with the overall way we came out. And yet we take a lot of pride or embarrassment around it. It's just part of physical nature. The body is part of physical nature and it will follow the laws of physical nature.

One of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, said it like this: "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 great relief for you."

You can also reflect on that with emotions. We've talked about how our emotions are part of the whole human package. For everyone who's not highly enlightened, we have the same range of emotions. We all feel at times the same happiness or sadness or joy or loneliness or anger, whatever. We all have that because it's all part of human nature.

And then consciousness, the fifth aggregate—that's just nature also. We all have this ability to know sense objects, and that's really all it is. All humans have this same type of knowing of the objects of the senses.

Sometimes we can identify with consciousness as the observer. But we can reflect on that and realize there's not really a little person behind that observing function.

Yet there's another way in dharma language we might identify with consciousness. We might say something like, "Okay, I get it. I'm not the body. I'm not the emotions. I'm not the thoughts. What I really am, my fundamental identity, is this vast awareness that it's all happening in." This vast awareness just always seems to be here. It includes all the comings and goings, but that's really me. The vast awareness—oh, that's what I am.

What's wrong with this view? First, the "I" is unnecessary. The vast awareness may be there, but there's no need to claim it. It's just part of nature. And the vast awareness is no different between me and you. So there's nothing unique or self-like about it. This identification doesn't stand up either.

So there's no place within the aggregates that the sense of self really stands up under investigation. We examine each one, and it's not found anywhere. So how does it come about? Because we keep having this sense.

Ananda was a cousin of the Buddha who became the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. He's one of the most sympathetic characters in the Pali Canon—a lovable, humble,

devoted practitioner. When he was newly ordained, he relates this story. He had just ordained and a monk came up to him offering advice. This is the wisdom that this monk transmitted to Ananda: "Ananda, 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."

You can check this out in your meditation. Ask yourself: does the "I" ever arise on its own? Does it ever just go, "I"? Or does the "I" only arise in relation to other sense experience?

There's a pain in the knee. All of a sudden we think, "I have a pain in my knee." We could just say "unpleasant sensation." But if we get a little worried, and out of that worry we grasp the pain, look how soon the phrase will come: "I have a pain in my knee." The "I" and "my" are unnecessary, but the worry gives them potency. It gives them a charge.

Take a look when the sense of "I" arises and see if it hasn't come out of clinging to some kind of sense experience. This is what the Buddha referred to as I-making and mine-making. The Pali words are *ahanka ra* and *mamankara*. We construct the sense of "I" over and over by grabbing hold of experience at one of the five aggregates, or you could say one of the six senses. If we don't grab hold, no "I" arises. No sense of self arises.

Start to pay attention to this in your meditation. When is there the fixation and grabbing hold of a sense experience with the attendant feeling of "I" and "my"? And when is it that in your meditation you're not grabbing hold of anything? What's that like?

What is it like when you're grabbing hold and self is being born? And what's it like when there's just a spacious, open, non-grasping attention and the self isn't being formed? What do those two feel like?

Explore that, investigate, and tell me where you'd rather meditate from. I think you'll find the experience without "I" to be much more easeful, peaceful, open, spacious, balanced, equanimous. Start to investigate and see what it feels like.

The seeing into not-self is not a cold, intellectual, academic exercise. It is to remove the excessive self-concern that we generate when we feel the tight constriction of self.

When we remove that excessive self-concern, the heart can open easily into love and compassion. This is why we investigate self—to discover that open space where love and compassion can flow very easily.

These two experiences, the absence of self—sometimes described as the emptiness of self—and the movement into love and compassion, support one another. They need one another. One naturally flows into the other.

This understanding brings us to a beautiful quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj that captures this perfectly: "Love tells me I am everything. Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows."

Let loving kindness carry you into a deep connection with all of life, and let Vipassana carry you into the wisdom of not being anything particular at all.

So let's just sit for a minute.

Love tells me I'm everything. Wisdom tells me I'm nothing.

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