The Five Aggregates Are Empty

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:15

The subject of the talk tonight is the five aggregates are empty.

Two weeks ago I talked about the five aggregates being the components of experience that make us up: material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. In that talk we went into how none of these can be a ground for confirming a true self within the mind-body process. All there is is these five aggregates. There is no one to whom they belong. There is no one at the center that constitutes an essence of the aggregates. This was the teaching on not-self. The Pali word for that is anatta.

Tonight I want to look at the five aggregates in terms of their quality of being empty. Emptiness in the Buddhist tradition is known as sunyata. It's a very important term and has been for the 2500 years that Buddhism has been around. It has become central in every lineage of the Dharma, every practice lineage since the time of the Buddha.

In the talk tonight, I want to look at two aspects of the meaning of emptiness in relation to the aggregates. The first aspect is this absence of self—that within the five aggregates there is no abiding or continuing entity that can be called a center or self. This is put very succinctly in the Buddha's answer to a question from Ananda. Ananda, you remember, was his attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life, a very devoted, loyal, and kind person.

Ananda asked the Buddha, "The world is empty. The world is empty. In what way is the world empty?" And the Buddha said, "The world is empty because it is empty of a self and of what belongs to a self." In other words, the world is empty of "I" and it is empty of "mine." In this sense, anatta or not-self and sunyata or emptiness mean the same thing in this context of the world being empty of self.

I want to talk about this a little bit more. These words "I" and "mine" don't have an ultimate reference. They're conventionally useful, but they don't point to any single thing that endures. And yet we can see that, but the sense of "I" keeps coming back. It's very curious. We can see many times this absence of self, and yet we continue to be fooled by the sense when it comes, and we think, "Oh, it feels like it's there." So how does that happen?

This is a quote I mentioned last week, another from Ananda. Another monk told me when we were newly ordained, "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, and consciousness. In other words, the sense of "I am" arises when we hold on to one of the aggregates or to a sense object.

The Buddha put this another way, saying the same thing: "When there is form, by clinging to form, by

adhering to form, one regards things thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is myself.'" And then he repeats that for the other four aggregates. Basically, by grasping something, we give rise to the sense of self, either as "I" or as "mine."

But when this doesn't take place, this seeing of the absence of self can be completely liberating. There's a very nice story of a visitor named Bahiya. Bahiya was a sincere spiritual practitioner who lived in the south of India. He lived very simply. He had strong renunciation. He had many followers. And yet he was unsure whether he was fully enlightened or not. That might have been a clue, but he held it as a question: maybe I'm fully enlightened.

It so happened that one of these celestial beings, a deva, came down and told him, "Sorry, Bahiya, you are not fully enlightened, nor are you on the path to enlightenment." What a message. And so Bahiya said, "Well, do you know of anyone who is an Arahant?" The celestial being said, "Yes, there is one named Siddhartha Gautama, and he lives in the north of India, and he is teaching now, and he is a fully awakened Buddha."

Bahiya immediately resolved to go there and receive teaching. He traveled from the south to the north, a long distance, hundreds of miles, and caught up with the Buddha. He immediately went to seek him out.

And he found him when the Buddha was on alms round. The Buddha was walking slowly, mindfully through the city, and Bahiya came up to him and said, "Are you the one I have heard of called the Blessed One, Gautama Buddha?"

The Buddha acknowledged that he was, and Bahiya said, "Please, Venerable Sir, I've traveled a long distance to see you. Can you give me the teaching, your Dharma, in brief?"

The Buddha said, "No, Bahiya, this is not the right time. I'm on alms round and this is not a convenient time for me. Please come later."

But Bahiya wouldn't accept that. He said, "Venerable Sir, I so want to hear the teaching. Life is short. Who knows what might happen? You might die or I might die. Please give me the teaching in brief."

Again the Buddha declined: "No, Bahiya, this is not the right time. I am on alms round now."

Bahiya was persistent. He asked a third time: "Please, Venerable Sir, this is urgent. Who knows how long each of us might live?"

As often happens when the Buddha is requested a third time, he acceded. He said that he would teach Bahiya in brief. And this is the message that he gave him:

"Therefore, Bahiya, this is how you should train: In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. In the cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you

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

In other words, when we stop making "I" and "mine" through the medium of sense contact, suffering stops.

When he said this, Bahiya fully awakened. Bahiya was well prepared, and his mind just opened on that brief instruction. He fully realized what the Buddha was pointing to. Later, the Buddha referred to him as his disciple foremost in quickness of learning, quickness of understanding.

Bahiya withdrew, and the Buddha continued on his alms round. Later that afternoon, walking through a field, Bahiya came close to a cow who probably had a calf nearby. The cow attacked him and gored him, and he died on the spot. But the Buddha confirmed for all his disciples that Bahiya had fully awakened before he died, and therefore his journey was complete. That message of "who knows how long you may live or I may live" turned out to be very prophetic. But Bahiya realized.

This was the insight into not-self that completely freed Bahiya's mind. When there is no grasping after the objects of the senses, there is no creation of "I." And in that no creation of "I," suffering has no grounds to arise.

So this is the first meaning of emptiness within our tradition: the clear seeing that this mind-body process, as described by the aggregates, is empty of a self or what belongs to a self.

The second meaning of emptiness is around the notion of insubstantiality—that the aspects of our experience, our sense experience, described as the six kinds of sense objects or as the five aggregates, are not solid, not substantial.

I'll read a passage from one of the key discourses in the Pali Canon. This is from a volume called *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*—in Pali, it's the Samyutta Nikaya. Bonnie thought I should ask: have you all read this book? At least to suggest that it's a good idea. But we'll read a little tonight.

There are not a huge number of suttas that point to this insubstantial nature, but it is clearly there in the Pali Canon. There is more emphasis on the aspect of not-self, but the teachings on the emptiness of phenomena are clearly present from the early days of the Buddhist teachings.

This is a sutta called "A Lump of Foam":

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: "Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam."

You have to imagine that this is a frothy mixture of water and air that has been stirred up by the river. Sometimes we might think a lump of foam would be a block of styrofoam, but 2,500 years ago, that was not the case. This is a bunch of frothy bubbles carried along on the river.

"A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is, a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?"

This is the first aggregate that he is talking about—material form. And he is saying, what substance could there be in form? It is like a mass of foam.

This is radical. Because we normally take the body and this physical world to be very solid. In granting them reality, we have also attributed solidity to them. And so the Buddha is saying that this very body and all the world that we see is just like a lump of foam. Could that be accurate? Could he really mean it? He is meaning it. And this is a very clear pointing to this nature of insubstantiality or emptiness of matter.

We know from twentieth-century quantum science that matter mostly consists of space. The amount of substance in the form simply of protons, neutrons, and electrons occupies a very small volume of all the matter that we see in the universe. It is overwhelmingly empty space. And yet the Buddha had this intuition, had this insight from his direct experience 2,500 years earlier.

How else can we see form as being like a mass of foam? A few years ago, I was teaching at Spirit Rock on our month-long retreat in February. In the middle of the dharma talk one evening, as I was talking, there came this loud cry from outside the meditation hall. It sounded like a baby wailing really loudly. Of course it was a little disturbing to hear that, so a couple of the staff members who were in the hall went out to see what was happening. Otherwise I continued with the talk and people continued listening.

When the talk ended we all went outside to see what had happened, and we found the staff members standing over the dead body of an adult deer, which was just laid out on the ground near one of the residence halls. One of the staff members reported that they had seen a couple of large dogs running away when they came out to check on what the sound was. It is not uncommon in the countryside where Spirit Rock is located that packs of dogs will attack a deer and kill it, but it had never happened on the Spirit Rock land before.

So there we were, a number of us—staff and teachers and some of the yogis—standing around this dead body of the deer. Of course it was very powerful and shocking. In the middle of a retreat, we did not really know what to do, but we knew to stand around and send metta to the deer, wherever its being might be at that point. So we did that for a while, formed a circle, sent metta to the deer.

After doing that, we went about our business, continuing with the retreat. The caretakers called the Marin Humane Society, who said, "Yes, we understand this happens in Woodacre from time to time. We'll come out tomorrow and pick the deer up. Please take it down near the entrance to the property, and we'll come by and pick it up." So the caretakers bundled up the deer and put it into a pickup and drove it down near the entrance and left the body there.

The Humane Society never came. They probably had more pressing things to do. So every day, as we continued to go and come from the retreat, we could observe the body. Interestingly, every day there was a bit less of the deer there to observe because overnight the different animals would come and start to pick it clean. Within about ten days, all that was left of the deer were the bones, the fur, the hooves. All the flesh had been picked completely clean by vultures, by raccoons, by insects—all kinds of scavengers that came.

It was just so shocking. Here was a body that had been complete ten days ago, and now it had completely disappeared.

Form was like a mass of foam. There and then gone. Gone into energy. Gone into food. Disappeared. So that was one way it was demonstrated—this body is like a mass of foam.

Another way comes out of dharma teaching. Some years ago, the Dalai Lama was giving teachings on the Heart Sutra at an outdoor amphitheater in Mountain View in the Bay Area, and a lot of us went. It was a beautiful May season. The teachings were over a few days, and we were spread out in this kind of natural amphitheater, Shoreline Amphitheater. The Dalai Lama was up on a stage up front with what must have been about a hundred monks and nuns from different Buddhist lineages. The Tibetans were on one side with their red robes, and the Theravadans were on another side with their brown and ochre robes. And then the Zen monks from Japan and Korea were there in their black and gray robes. So the whole stage was filled with this very respected monastic presence.

The Dalai Lama was perched on a throne so that everyone could see him better. And the backdrop was a big canvas painting—where the Grateful Dead would have had an array of hundreds of speakers, instead the Dalai Lama had a big painting of the Potala Palace in Lhasa in the days when he would have been living there, before the occupation. It was this very beautiful setting, and on the hillside were thousands of people, some in seats and others spread out on the grass. It felt actually like a Buddhist Woodstock—a kind of gathering of the tribes, with great energy.

So he gave these teachings on the Heart Sutra, which is all about emptiness, as you probably know. And he came to a section where he was explaining dukkha, unsatisfactoriness. He talked about the third type of dukkha, which I think Winnie probably talked about a little while ago. The third type is called sankhara dukkha, which is the unsatisfactoriness of formations.

The way he explained it was like this. He said, you know, we think impermanence means that something goes along for a while and exists as a kind of solid thing, and then it disappears—sort of the gross view you might have of a creature going along living, then dying, disappearing. But he said that's not the meaning of this third type of dukkha. The dukkha of formations is that things are always dissolving. Nothing exists as a solid thing from one moment to the next. When you look closely with the eyes of meditation, everything is dissolving in the area of the senses moment after moment after moment.

This is something that we can understand through our meditation practice—this unsatisfactoriness of formations, of all conditioned objects, all the sense objects. You can take a look at material form in your direct experience and see this unstable nature.

One of the places we might look first is in the body directly. I know a lot of you have seen this, sometimes many times. When you look closely at a body sensation, is it characterized by solidity or is it characterized by change? If you haven't explored, take these next days and explore. When you look closely at a body sensation, even if it's one of pressure or heaviness, you can see moment-to-moment variation in it—changes in intensity, changes of pulsation, changes of vibration. You'll feel that as you look closely at things. As we start to investigate this material form, the body from inside, there's nothing really solid that we can find and hold on to. It's all in a process of flux.

Then we look at the other aspects of material form—sounds, smells, tastes—even less substantial. Can you grasp a sound? When you're listening to music, can you stop it and grab a note? As soon as you perceive a note, it's already passed and the next note is there. Sound is also characterized by variation, by change in volume, in pitch. Sound is ungraspable. Smells and tastes around the meal table—can you lock onto that lasagna from a couple of days ago? Tastes are very ephemeral. Smells are hard to even catch in the first moment.

That's why this quote, again in the Samyutta: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise one takes no delight in form."

Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling—we see it in the body, in sound, smell, and taste. The last of the senses that make up material form is sight, but it's the hardest to penetrate, to see the changing nature, so we'll come back to that one.

This discourse goes on. Form is like a mass of foam. And then the Buddha goes on to say that feeling tone is like an airy bubble—just a bubble in a stream, like when a raindrop falls in it. Plop, gone. Perception is like a mirage, just a vision in a desert somewhere. Formations are like the trunk of a plantain tree. Plantain is a variety of banana, and if you've ever watched a banana tree growing in the tropics, what you'll find is it only flowers or fruits once, and then it dies because the trunk is not solid. The trunk of a banana tree is just coils of green vegetation. There's no heartwood, there's nothing solid there. You uncoil it, and the tree is just soft. So formations are as empty, as insubstantial as the trunk of a banana tree.

These are the comparisons for the other aggregates. And as you explore, you can ask: Is feeling tone solid, something you can take hold of? Can you grab a perception and hang on to it? And what about thoughts in the area of mental formations? It's just a poof of energy, isn't it? Just a blip. Emotions are so cloud-like that sometimes we can hardly tell they're there. These are the signs of the emptiness of all the other aggregates—insubstantial, ungraspable. I encourage you to continue to look in your actual meditation experience and check this out. Investigate and see if any of the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations—are graspable. See if you can find anything solid to hold onto in them.

This brings us to the last aggregate, which is consciousness. Here's the analogy for consciousness: "Suppose, bhikkhus, that a magician should hold a magic show at a crossroads, and a keen-sighted person should inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it. It would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance could there be in a magic show? Even so, monks, whatever consciousness there is, a person inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it. It would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance could there be in consciousness?"

So consciousness is being compared to a magic show—basically an illusion, a magician's illusion. Consciousness, this knowing quality that reveals, that illuminates all the sense impressions: a magician's illusion.

Why would this be of interest? If you think about magic tricks, they're really cool when you first see them, aren't they? Kind of unbelievable. How did they do that? A hundred years ago, the best-known magician in the world, as far as I know, was Houdini. He would draw many people to watch his performances. Here's one of the typical things he would do. He would have people tie up his hands with ropes and chains. Then they would wrap more ropes and chains around his whole body. Then they would place him in a wooden box, someone would hammer down the lid to the box, and then they would toss him in a deep river. That would be fun, huh? People would wait and think, "There's no way he's going to get out of this. He's dead. He's never going to come up from this water." And then a few minutes later, Houdini would swim to the surface, break the water with a big smile, and people on the shore would be wild with disbelief.

Magic tricks are really impressive—until we know that it's a trick. And then what happens? Well, I'll tell you the story of how Houdini did it, because this is a dharma talk and not a magic show.

When they tied his hands up, they tied them really loosely. It looked like they were tight, but they weren't, so he could wriggle his hands out of those bonds. He had tucked into his cheeks several little wrenches, like little Allen wrenches, and he pulled them out. He was an expert lock picker, so using the Allen wrenches, he would pick the locks that were on the rest of the chains that tied his whole body up.

Once he got those done, there's one more trick coming, but there's a big piece of skill in the middle: he had trained to hold his breath for up to three minutes underwater. This is not easy to do. Usually after about a minute we start panicking, and there's this strong desire to swallow, which is not a good idea. So he trained himself to hold his breath for three minutes.

He was doing all this while holding his breath. He'd gotten rid of the ropes around his wrist. He'd gotten rid of the chains around his body. He was still in a wooden box. But the trick was that one side of the box was very lightly tacked on. So he just kicked that side of the box, he was out in the water, swam to the surface, took a deep breath of air. Everybody was amazed. That was magic.

So once you know the trick, it's not as impressive, is it? It brings in this element that we call disenchantment. Disenchantment is a factor—in Pali, the word is *nibbidā*. It's a wholesome factor of mind

that is an important part of the journey to liberation when it's described as the building up of wholesome factors, because what it leads to is dispassion. When we see how the trick is performed, we're not enchanted by it any longer. And then we're not as stuck to the belief in the reality of it.

Consciousness is a magic show, but we don't know that. We don't know that it's a trick of sorts, that it has embedded within it, in the way we hold it, a kind of illusion.

So then the Buddha went through all of these. He said, "Form is like a mass of foam and feeling but an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and formations a plantain tree. Consciousness is a magic show. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun"—which is another word for the Buddha.

So the magic is that through consciousness, we think the world is solid. Consciousness reveals a world and we think it's a solid reality. And then by taking it so seriously, we think we can hold on to it. This is the sad part. Because it's not solid, we can't hold on to it. Seeing that is the same message as seeing impermanence—everything goes, and we can't really grasp. But emptiness takes it a step further, which we'll get to.

We live in a culture where this is not well understood, the lack of solidity in the world. We live in a culture that takes this material world as the ultimate reality. This worldview, which has been around in philosophy for thousands of years, is called materialism. It says that this is the true reality. Everything else comes out of this matter, including us. Somehow evolution made it possible for bodies to grow and then bodies generated consciousness. But everything fundamentally depends on matter. So our fundamental view is that this world is the ultimate reality. We came into this world at birth. We're trapped in it for however many years. And when we die, it continues, but we don't. This is one view, and it seems to be the dominant view in Western culture right now, the dominant view of materialism.

But if you look at ancient Indian philosophies, for example, some of them took consciousness as primary and said basically the physical world was an invention from consciousness. Everything that's physical just appears as a blip in consciousness. And consciousness will endure even if the physical world doesn't.

So this is interesting to consider, isn't it? What's the reality? In the Buddha's teachings, it's interesting—he sort of follows a middle way.

Consciousness and form lean against each other. He said like two sheaves of reeds. If you take one away, the other collapses. Take away consciousness and form will collapse. Take away form and consciousness will collapse. So this is interesting.

But in any case, what we do have is a situation where everything in our experience arises in consciousness, and this has implications. Let's apply this to the world of sight, because this is the hardest to penetrate, isn't it? You look at a wall, it seems very real and solid. You tap on it, it feels very solid. So we might think, well, the other senses might be flimsy, but sight is really giving us solid and real impressions. Let's see if that's true.

We can call on a little bit of the science we know to understand how the sight of wall occurs for us. We know, and this is not too sophisticated, that for us to see a wall, light has to fall on it. The light has to be reflected from the wall to land on our eye. The light that falls on our eye triggers a signal to the brain. That signal gets interpreted in some way that no one understands—scientists aren't even close to figuring this out. And then, boom, the sight of wall appears. Take away the light, take away the eye, take away the nerve, take away the brain—no sight appears.

In order for that sight to keep appearing, if you see the front wall right now, in order for that sight to keep appearing to you, light has to continue to land on it and reflect to your eyes. So that sight is not ongoing. You know that. If you think about the seventh-grade physics of it, you know that millions of photons are hitting that wall and therefore hitting your eye every second, and that impingement of photons is what's recreating the image of the wall over and over and over. There's no solid image anywhere in your visual experience. The image is only being recreated over and over and over, many times a second.

Could that kind of image be said to be solid? No. It's only being recreated by our sense organ, our brain, and our human consciousness, which are all conditioned and go into fabricating this image of wall that we see and believe is solid, but really isn't. The image is not solid.

So when we look closely at the mechanism of sight, we can see the insubstantial nature there too. Everything is changing moment by moment. The problem is we think we're seeing a world, but we're only seeing a representation of it constructed by our sense organs, brain, and consciousness. We don't live in a real world. We live in a fabricated representation of something. Who knows what's actually out there? I don't. But we think we do. We think it's real and solid, and it's only a representation through the senses.

Here's another thing that intrigued me. I used to reflect on this. If I ask you what color this book is, it's pretty clear, right? You would say that it's blue. So let's think about that with the question: where is blue? Is blue really in this book?

Again, if you know science, you know that what's happening is white light falls on this, absorbs the other colors, and reflects blue back to your eye. So that's why you're seeing blue—because you're seeing the reflected blue light. But the other colors, the other end of the spectrum—red, orange, yellow—are being absorbed. So if the book is anything, it's red, orange, yellow, not blue. In fact, you could say this book is really not blue. What it's reflecting back is blue.

So where is blue? It's only in your experience, isn't it? It's just an arising in consciousness. That's the only place blue exists.

It doesn't exist in the book. It only exists in your consciousness.

So we live in a representation of the world that's created by our senses, brain, and consciousness, but we mistakenly give it a solidity that it has never had. And we think we live in the real world.

One way to undo this a little bit is that instead of talking about objects—sense objects—we should talk about appearances. Sometimes I'll use that language, sometimes I'll use "objects," but you have to do the translation internally. We're just talking about things that appear.

One of my teachers said, "Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever"—meaning substantial existence. They are only appearances. That's why consciousness is like a magic show. In Tibetan Buddhism, they call this the magical display of the world through consciousness. Sometimes you get that feeling, don't you, with the autumn leaves? That is really a magical display going on out there. Who knows how it happens? But it's incredible.

So everything in our experience is just an arising in consciousness. There's no solidity there.

This is from the Diamond Sutra, a key text in the Mahayana:

Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world: like a star at dawn, a flickering lamp, a bubble in a stream, an echo, a mirage, and a dream.

This reality is like a dream. When you think about that, is there any real difference between a moment of experience here and a moment of experience in a dream? Is there any real difference? How can you tell the difference? It's truly as insubstantial as a dream. It does seem to have more continuity, but that relies on memory. But in a moment of experience, can you tell the difference?

The nice thing about comparing it to a dream is that it really brings out the fundamental message of seeing emptiness. If you were in a dream, would you cling? If you were in a dream and knew you were in a dream, would you cling to the things of the dream? Not if you were smart.

One time I was about ten years old and it was the night before Christmas. I went to sleep and had a dream that my basement was full of these racks from floor to ceiling, and the racks were full of presents for me. I was very disappointed when I woke up because I had clung to those things in the dream. But if we know it's a dream, we don't cling. And this is like a dream.

So this is the sense of the emptiness of appearances, or the emptiness of sense phenomena. Emptiness doesn't mean a place of nothingness. It doesn't mean a vacancy. It doesn't mean a meditative state where there's no contact happening. It means understanding the insubstantial nature of everything that arises.

When we start to see this insubstantiality through and through and through every sense experience, we start to see that nothing actually lasts long enough to be called a thing. These appearances, as you really look closely, they're really fleeting. Nothing is actually there enough to be a solid thing. And that's why Nagarjuna, the great philosopher of emptiness, said, "That to which language refers is denied." I think that's brilliant. What language refers to is denied. The nouns that language refers to—there aren't any nouns. There's only process.

This is from the Heart Sutra:

While practicing deeply the perfection of wisdom, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress.

There's a key text of the Mahayana. The perception of the emptiness of the five aggregates removes all suffering and distress. Why? Because it undoes grasping.

Impermanence shows us that if we hold on to something, eventually it's going to pass, and that holding will have been futile. But emptiness shows us, if we understand it deeply enough, there's nothing there to hold on to in the first place. There's no solid thing, even temporarily, to hold to. So when one sees that, there is no inclination to grasp.

At this point we see that we're actually empty in two ways.

They're related and they build on each other. They're powerful in building on each other.

The first way is that this mind-body process is empty of a central essence or self that's ongoing. This is anattā. The second way is that every component that is real in this process—the five aggregates or the six types of sense objects—are all insubstantial and therefore empty. So there's no center, therefore empty of self, and there's no solidity anywhere in the components, therefore insubstantial and empty. We're empty in both those ways.

One of the things that really brought this home to me happened when I was a monk in Thailand. One of the great things about being a monk—there were a lot of great things—but one of them was that we got to be very close to dead bodies on a number of occasions. I was thirty-two years old, I think, and I'd never stood next to a dead body before. People in my life had died, but it seemed as soon as they died, either medicine or law just took them away. So I'd never been next to a dead body.

In Thailand, we had the opportunity to do this in different ways. One was outdoor funerals. Sometimes villagers would bring a body into a monastery, build a big pile of wood as a pyre, set the body on top of it, and we could visit the body before the fire was lit. Then the fire would be lit and we could observe the cremation. But in the urban setting, we had another alternative, which was the morgue. Monks and nuns were allowed to visit the morgue at a downtown hospital in Bangkok and observe autopsies being performed. So I did that.

The first thing when I walked into the morgue, I stood next to a dead body that was laid out on a steel table. I had never been so close to a dead body before. Then the body was wheeled into the coroner's theater, basically. We took seats in the elevated rows around the theater—a few monastics and then medical students—and watched the coroner perform an autopsy on this body that I had just been standing next to.

I don't know if you've ever seen an autopsy. If you're queasy, you might not want to listen to this. But the first step was that the coroner made a deep incision from one ear going across the top of the skull through

the skin to the other ear, right down to the bone. Having made that incision, with his two hands he took hold of those two flaps of skin and peeled them in opposite directions. So the face of the person came off and the back of the skull was exposed as the skin was peeled in the other direction. What that did was cleanly expose the skull itself. Then he took a saw and started cutting through the skull all around the outside until he could take off the top half and expose the brain. Once the brain was exposed, he took it out, examined it to see if there were any diseases, to see if it might be related to the cause of death, and he weighed it and recorded the weight.

Then he made a deep incision down the person's front from about the neck down to the navel and started opening up first the skin and then cutting through the ribs and opening the rib cage so that he could take out those organs—the heart, the lungs, the liver, spleen, and so on. He took out each of those organs, examined them for any disease, weighed them, recorded it. When he was done, he put everything back in its right place, including the brain and scalp, and he sewed it all up again so that the body looked, more or less from the outside, like it had when he brought it in. That was the completion of that autopsy. It took about thirty minutes. I sat there and then he did two more autopsies just in the same way—brought out two additional corpses and went through the same procedure.

I'd been sitting in my monastery for several weeks at that point in retreat. I was pretty still, very present, and really open. So this kind of blew my mind. I'd never really stood next to a dead body before, and the way they were cut up and opened and kind of invaded was shocking to my sensibilities. It really stunned me, but it was too interesting to turn away from.

I exited the coroner's office, left the morgue, and went back into central Bangkok to catch a bus back to my monastery. I was just in this very altered place from what I'd been observing. It was near the parade ground, Sanam Luang, if you know Bangkok. So there were a lot of people going by—old women walking by with their groceries, young couples walking by hand in hand, children kicking a ball around a big grassy field. And I would look at them all, and they seemed just like the bodies I'd just seen under the autopsy. The word that came to my mind as I hung out with this, because they just didn't seem very far apart, was "walking corpses." We're all just walking corpses.

Then I started to reflect on what that meant, because it doesn't make a lot of sense—corpses don't walk. But I started to reflect on what that meant to me, and I saw that we're very similar to those bodies I had just seen. The difference was there was like this light shining out of people's eyes who were still moving around, something that was somehow related to consciousness. There was still that spark of consciousness in the ones who were living and walking and moving. It just struck me that what most fundamentally they were, what we were, was a body plus this consciousness. That's what I was seeing: body plus consciousness.

Of course there were mental states present too, but they seemed less fundamental than body and consciousness. So I started looking at people as being mostly body plus consciousness. And that became

very interesting because the body is totally of the moment. Of course it's had a history, but right now the body is totally of the moment. Consciousness is totally of the moment, with no tie to the past.

But we have this peculiar faculty of memory that lets us store up conscious experiences and hold them, then call them up and project them into the future in some way or another. This very peculiar thing called memory—it has a lot to do with constructing the belief in a self. But if you simply see a person as body plus consciousness, you don't have that history.

Try it as you look around the room if your eyes are open right now during the talk. When your eyes land on somebody, see them as just body plus consciousness, totally in this moment. Or if you're doing reflection on a friend, see them as just body plus consciousness.

Then try seeing them with all the personal history you know of them. There's a body plus consciousness, plus they have a long past. They have successes and failures, things in their life that they've loved, times they've had conflict, whole family relationships, parents, possibly children, livelihood, careers, fortunes won, fortunes lost. See how it feels to bring in all of that. Which is lighter? Which is freer?

When you just see the present moment—body plus consciousness, and maybe there's a little mood there, a mind state—it's so light. This is the liberation of the five aggregates. We can learn to see others and we can learn to see ourselves just in the present moment. We don't need the history, we don't need the projection into the future. And when we see in that way, it's really freeing.

This is an exercise you can do with yourself and with other people. Learn to see as body plus consciousness. It's very light and it's very free. This is what opens up through the seeing of emptiness, through the seeing of insubstantiality of all the aggregates—the magic show of consciousness, the lightness of being that we all carry when we don't attribute solidity to ourselves and the world.

This is from the Visuddhimagga: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers." I wonder if you can get the sense of this. There is no one at the center who is doing the suffering. There is suffering, but no one it's happened to. One meditator put it really beautifully when they said, "Suffering is rope burn. It comes from trying to hold on to something that's passing through." It's the holding on that causes the suffering when we cling to what's passing.

Empty phenomena roll on—also from the Visuddhimagga. The aggregates are doing their thing. They're all aspects of nature, physical nature, mental nature. Empty phenomena rolling on. This way of seeing is very freeing, but it's not a cold way of seeing. It actually evokes a lot of compassion.

In the Tibetan realm, they say emptiness is the womb of compassion. Why? Because it shows our vulnerability. There isn't anything solid to hang on to. Therefore, we're all subject to change on every level at any time, all subject to change.

We were talking about this in a senior students group at Spirit Rock some years ago, and one of the

students wrote this afterwards. She said, "It's spooky. I would look at everything like this Japanese lamp that I love and I'd see it's just an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all appearances. When I went from an object and said it's an appearance to a person and said they're an appearance, it made my hair stand on end. But it's true, and it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see that she's changing all the time. When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're all so fragile."

In Mahayana Buddhism, in Chinese Buddhism, Kuan Yin is the embodiment of the quality of compassion, the bodhisattva of compassion. There's a beautiful representation of her at the back of this hall and another beautiful representation in the walking room next door. It's said that Kuan Yin hears all the cries of beings in the world—the ten thousand cries of joy and the ten thousand cries of sorrow. But Kuan Yin is a bodhisattva, and that means she's not a beginning meditator. She understands that there's suffering, but she also understands there's no one who suffers.

And that's the wisdom that lets her hold the suffering of this world with equanimity as well as compassion. It's what lets her hold it in the balance that gives rise to the equanimity on the face of the statue of the Buddha.

Through seeing emptiness, the heart becomes less burdened. We release a lot of self-concern, and compassion and loving-kindness open up toward the whole of existence. Out of this freedom, we also see the causes of suffering and that it's not necessary. The suffering, to a large degree, comes out of an illusory understanding of the world and its components as abiding in self and solidity.

So Kuan Yin understands that there is not a true source for suffering within the conditioned world. There is not an inevitable source of suffering. And so this is a quotation that's been attributed to Kuan Yin:

The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?

Let's just sit for a minute together.

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