The Aggregates Are Empty

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:19

The subject of tonight's talk is the aggregates are empty. We've been discussing emptiness in connection with awareness for about a week now, but we really haven't explored it in any detail. So tonight I want to go into the topic of emptiness in a little more depth, speaking about it in terms of the five aggregates.

As many of you know, the aggregates are a framework for describing our whole human experience. Everything that we know as human beings falls under one of the categories of the five aggregates. These aggregates are empty in two ways, which we'll explore. The first is there's no self in the center of them, no one who owns them or to whom they're happening. The second way they're empty is that all the phenomena of the aggregates are insubstantial. These two approaches are called the emptiness of self and the emptiness of phenomena. We want to look at both of these tonight in terms of the aggregates.

We can turn to the study guide if you're interested on page five. Ananda was obviously puzzled by this word too, because he approached the Buddha and said, "Venerable Sir, it is said 'empty is the world, empty is the world.' In what way is it said 'empty is the world'?" And the Buddha replied, "It is, Ananda, because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, 'empty is the world.'"

So the world is empty of self, and yet our personal experience doesn't seem so empty of self. Our personal experience seems to be dominated by the sense of I and mine. It's something that we have to look into. We look at ourselves and we definitely see a self there. We look at another person and we assume there's a self there.

The Visuddhimagga said that this is like someone who's a butcher—excuse the analogy, I'm a longtime vegetarian and I support animal rights, but this analogy is in the text. It's like a butcher who's carving up a cow into pieces of meat for sale. As the butcher cuts it up, he's not saying "cow, cow, cow." In fact, the butcher doesn't do that because he's so familiar with the anatomy that he's going "ribs, tenderloin, sirloin, rump." So the analogy is that if we are really familiar with this mind-body process, we don't say "person." We see what's actually here. We want to look to see the way the Buddha looked, and he didn't look in terms of self.

Because as it says in quote twenty, "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." One of my teachers put it a little more directly. He said, "Everything you think is wrong. Everything you think about self, if you believe in one, is wrong. The fact is ever other than that."

When the Buddha looked at a human being, I think he saw in one of two ways. One is the six types of sense organs and their objects. This is described really nicely in quote twenty-two. The Buddha says,

"Bhikkhus, what is the totality of things? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality. What is the totality? 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. If anyone were to proclaim a totality beyond this, that person would be speaking of something outside their knowledge."

This is really a pretty radical statement. Here we have the founder of one of the world's great religions, one of the most influential humans who's ever lived on the face of the earth, and he's saying the totality on which I am basing my view of things is the six sense organs and their objects. That is your direct human experience of things. We're not talking about some transcendent God figure or Brahman or monotheistic God. The foundation of Buddhism is your direct experience. This is pretty radical.

It's what opens the door for our meditation practice to look at these six classes of objects. This is what Vipassana meditation does. It looks at the sense experience and investigates it because that's what makes us up. So I said the Buddha saw in one of two ways. This is the first way. Bhikkhu Bodhi said that he tended to use this analysis to cut through craving—the analysis through the sense doors. The other way of looking is through the five aggregates. It's describing the same realm of human experience.

The aggregates form a complete map of human experience, with each category representing a different kind of process. When we recognize how these five collections function together, we begin to see the mechanisms that create our sense of being a solid, permanent self.

Let me walk through each aggregate in more detail. The first, material form or rupa, encompasses everything physical. This includes not just our body and all external objects, but also the sense impressions themselves - the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and physical sensations we encounter. Even the interactions between physical forms belong to this category. When I strike this bell, both the bell and the sound it produces are forms of rupa.

The second aggregate, feeling tone or vedana, describes the immediate quality that colors every moment of sense contact. Each experience carries with it a flavor of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant - what we often call neutral. This feeling tone appears instantaneously with any sense contact, before we even recognize what we're experiencing.

Feeling tone holds tremendous significance in the Buddha's teaching. It occupies its own position among the aggregates, forms the second foundation of mindfulness, and serves as a crucial link in dependent origination. Why such importance? Because feeling tone triggers our reactivity. Pleasant experiences generate craving and attachment. Unpleasant ones provoke aversion and resistance. Neutral experiences often get ignored entirely, leading to delusion or ignorance. We can think of feeling tone as the spark that ignites the three poisons.

When I ring this bell, most of you probably experience the sound as pleasant - particularly because it signals the end of sitting! But feeling tone remains subjective. What one person finds delightful, another

might find irritating. Consider how differently people respond to the taste of beets or the sound of jazz music. This subjectivity reveals that feeling tone, while seeming automatic, actually involves mental activity. As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, we feel into each experience to discern its pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality.

The third aggregate, perception or saññā, involves recognition based on memory and learned associations. When consciousness encounters a form, perception immediately categorizes it: chair, person, tree, microphone. This process happens so quickly we rarely notice it, yet it fundamentally shapes our experience.

If you examine your visual field carefully - perhaps by closing one eye to flatten the three-dimensional effect - you'll notice it consists simply of shapes and colors. Yet perception instantly organizes these raw sense impressions into meaningful categories drawn from past experience and language. This recognition process proves enormously influential because we respond to the world based on our perceptions, not the raw sense data itself.

A powerful example in the world today is this factor of implicit bias. When we are out and about in the world and we perceive someone of a different race or class or ethnicity, we often form a quick assumption about them based on that perception. And the perception is biased if we don't know them or know people like them. Generally, implicit bias acts to harm the people who are not in the dominant group of a culture based on that particular attribute.

So in terms of race, the dominant group being white tends to have some implicit bias toward people of color. The dominant group being heterosexual tends to have some implicit bias or judgment against people who are not heterosexual. These are widely culturally held assumptions. It doesn't mean that every one of us sees in this way, but this is what forms a culture—the dominant group having some implicit bias toward a non-dominant group. And it's very harmful. So we need to examine our perceptions, purify our perceptions, clarify our perception so that we see things the way they are.

Sometimes a perception can just keep us from going right to the root and seeing exactly what something is. For instance, sensation in the body, which we label as pain—often we just stop at that and draw back or push it away. But with our mindfulness training, we can penetrate to the actual experience. We can look beyond the label and say, oh, what's actually there? And sometimes when we do that, it's not quite as bad as we had thought. Sometimes the concept is scarier than the actuality of the thing.

Or we label things in the world and we don't look at them closely. Like this white thing that's in front of me right now—we might just think of it as a bell and then we stop looking. But if we look more closely, we might not know what that is. If we haven't been in this hall before, we might not know. And we'd say, is that supposed to be a planter? Is that supposed to be a bowl that a monk or a nun would eat out of? Wow, that would be a big meal.

So, looking past the perception and the label to see what's actually there, we get closer to the reality of the thing. They play with this a lot in Zen koans. You've probably heard this—a Zen master will go, "What is this? If you call it a stick, I will hit you. If you say it is not a stick, I will hit you." All I got from that is if I went to Zen, I'd get hit a lot. That's partly why I ended up in Vipassana.

So perception, we can investigate and clarify and observe. And when we hear this, generally we know that's a bell, that's a meditation bell, that sound. So we recognize it.

The fourth aggregate is called volitional formation, sometimes just mental formations, but I like "volitional formations" as a translation of the Pali word saṅkhāra. So this category includes mostly states of mind, moods, emotions, thoughts, meditative states of mind like mindfulness, concentration, tranquility—all included within this aggregate of volitional formations.

These are the things that form in the mind. One moment they may not be there, the next moment they may form. Mood, emotion, thought, mind state, come and go. But they are mind objects. So, hearing the bell coming at the end of a sitting, we might feel a sense of ease—it's over. And then we might think, oh, now I could sit forever. Somehow that bell just takes away the pressure. I could sit forever. So that feeling of ease and the thought, "I could sit forever"—those are volitional formations.

And the fifth aggregate is consciousness, vijñāna, which we've been exploring a lot, talking about a lot for the last week. It's that knowing quality of mind that reveals sense objects, knows sense objects, illuminates sense objects. It holds our experience, reveals our experience.

So as soon as one hears the bell, there's hearing consciousness with that sound. The two come up together. But we've been training—we can either look at the sound or we can look at the knowing of it. Both are there and we can look at that one experience from either aspect. So the interesting thing about consciousness is it's present with all the other aggregates. It knows the sound.

It knows the feeling tone. It knows the mental formation around the feeling. It knows the perception as well. So consciousness is with all the other aggregates.

Now, I'm not going to open this up tonight for discussion because it would be a long conversation, perhaps. But for you to check: is there anything in your experience that doesn't fit in one of these aggregates? This is a useful investigation. Is every part of your experience able to be slotted into one of the aggregates? I'll leave you to investigate and check that out.

If it's true—which I think it is, having been tested for about 2,500 years now—then this is a complete description of our human experience. Just like the discourse on totality, anybody who tried to talk of something outside this would be speaking of something they didn't know. So we'll take the Buddha's word for it.

Why is this model of the aggregates important? If it describes the whole of our human experience, there's

one element it does not include, and that is I, me, my. This list is telling us there is only form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. There's nothing else. There's no "I" that's at the center of it, who's experiencing it all, to whom the aggregates happen, who owns them, or who controls them.

These are hidden assumptions when we think of a self. We're at the center. We're independent of things. We experience hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, and so forth. Or, "I am the thinker. The thoughts come from me. I'm making them happen. I'm in control of my emotions." The self is woven into all these false assumptions, but there is only form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness.

We start to see that all of these aggregates have their own causes and conditions. They're all unfolding on their own, and they're out of our control. There's a limited amount we can do to influence them—some, but it's limited. When we start to see this, we realize that we don't have to try to control our experience the way we habitually do, and then we can surrender into it.

There's a great letting go that happens when we realize we don't have to protect a self, we don't have to maintain a self, we don't have to feed a self. We let things be the way they are.

There is something here that looks like a being, right? It looks like there's some kind of being here, but can you find a being? It's a little bit like Bodhidharma talking to Huike about "show me your mind." Show me your being. Well, you might point here, but that's just a body. So a being—there's no being. There's only a conventional designation of a bunch of pieces that have been put together in a certain way, which are the aggregates.

It's just like—if I hold this up, can everybody see? Is there any uncertainty about what this is? It's a pen, right? But if I take it apart into all its little pieces, I've got five little pieces now. I've got a tip, a cap, a cartridge, a barrel, and another cap. Five little pieces. Is this a pen? Nobody would call this a pen. These are the parts of a pen, but it's not a pen until you put it back together. Just five independent parts assembled in a certain order, and then we call it a pen, and we don't really think about it.

That's what the Buddha said we have to see about this mind-body process. We have to see the five different parts of the aggregates just as clearly as you see the five different parts of the pen to understand what a "being" is. There's no being apart from this assemblage of separate parts.

We can even go farther. We can say, this pen is gray and black and it's a ballpoint pen with a certain kind of gel ink in the cartridge. We can say all that about it and that's good in terms of conventional designation. So when we talk about a conventionally designated human being, we can say, "I'm white, I'm male, I was born middle class, I'm cisgender." All different kinds of things we can say about the beings that we see or the beings that we are.

Those descriptions are accurate. But there's no *I* in the middle of them all. Yes, there are characteristics to things that are put together, but there's no one thing called pen apart from this assemblage. There's no one thing called being apart from this assemblage of parts.

When we say there's no self here, we don't deny individual characteristics—that we're different, that we're all unique in the way we're put together. We can examine many different descriptions of people and those are all valid. But there's no *I* in the middle of them all. There's no self at the center.

We begin to see all the different pieces that make us up, and they're all conditioned. The Buddha had a dialogue with the bhikkhus about this in quote 24 on page 5. It begins with someone asking him, "How does personality view come to be?"—this belief that there really is a self here.

The Buddha replies, "An untaught ordinary person regards material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form," and then repeats this for the other aggregates. "This is how personality view comes to be."

I don't want to unpack this tonight, as it would make a good theme for a three-month reflection—a little long for this evening. So I'll continue with the passage.

"Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?"

Well, they're smart: "Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

"Suffering, venerable sir."

Let's pause with this language. What the Pali says is "dukkha or sukha?" Is material form *dukkha* or *sukha* ? And they reply, it's *dukkha*. I like to think of it in the broadest sense of being unsatisfactory. Can any material form give you lasting satisfaction and happiness, or does it eventually turn out to be unsatisfying because it changes?

So the bhikkhus, no dummies, say "unsatisfactory, *dukkha*." Here it's translated as suffering, but it's not all unpleasant. Material form isn't all unpleasant, but it's ultimately unsatisfying.

"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine. This I am. This is myself'?"

In other words, would you bet your life on what's going to change? Would you put your identity on what's changing and unreliable? Not a good idea.

This is the thrust of the Buddha's teaching: all these conditions of the five aggregates are subject to change, to passing away, and unreliability—*dukkha*. They all have their own nature, but they all share these characteristics.

We have a different assumption about the self. We think the *I* is ongoing. There's this assumption that I'm the same observer now who was there in grade school. I've been observing all these things happening over all these years and will keep observing until the day I die. That's the stable, ongoing self that the

Buddha denies, saying it doesn't exist that way.

All we are is an assemblage of parts that are all subject to arising and passing moment by moment. You could call them *I* if you felt yourself arising and passing every moment. But we don't. We feel like the self is going on and we're having different experiences. But in fact, our whole being is arising and passing moment by moment.

So the Buddha continues, and this goes on to page 6: "Therefore, any kind of material form should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself." And then that's repeated for the other of the five aggregates.

So this line—"not me, not mine, not who I am"—is a short way to say it. It's a kind of interesting line to play with. If you're in vipassana mode and you're investigating your experience, so not resting in awareness but investigating your experience, try adding these words to any experience you have. A sensation in the body: not me, not mine, not who I am. A thought: not me, not mine, not who I am. An emotion that's arising: not me, not mine, not who I am. A sight that you see outside, the suitcase you brought into your room: not me, not mine, not who I am.

So cutting through, using investigation to cut through this sense of "I" where it forms. And of course one of the places that it forms in a big way is around the body. We have a lot of identification with the body. If someone tells us that they think our body is not very attractive, we feel, "Oh, I'm not very attractive in that person's eyes." It's really close together.

But when you think about it, did you have anything to do with how this body came out? Okay, we can affect it a little bit with diet and healthcare and exercise and all of that. But did you have anything to determine whether you were tall or short? Whether your hair was straight or curly? Whether you were thin or broad-shouldered? Nothing. We didn't get to choose. Father's sperm met mother's egg. They merged, cells grew in the womb, popped out of the womb one day, nourished on milk, air, sun, and water, grew and grew, became grown up, aging, continuing. We didn't have any choice about that. That's just nature. It's the physical nature of the body. It wasn't our will, wasn't ours to choose. The body just happened and we've come along for the ride. Consciousness is just kind of along for the ride in this form.

And yet we take a lot of pride or embarrassment about how our body is. My teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, put it this way. 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."

So we can look at the other aggregates in this way too. Let's for the moment lump feeling and perception into volitional formations. They could go there—they got pulled out, singled out for some reason. Let's lump them back into volitional formations. So then we could talk about three aggregates: the body, volitional formations, and consciousness.

Take a look at volitional formations. Look at your thoughts and your emotions. Are these unique to you?

Are you the only one who has self-judgment? Are you the only one who has joy? Who has mindfulness? Who has fear? Who has anger? Our emotions aren't even unique. They're nature too. They're all part of human nature.

And what about this consciousness?

Is your consciousness unique? Are you the only one who has that consciousness? We imagine the knowing faculty is privately ours, yet this is the most universal thing in the world. I think ants have it, to tell you the truth.

So the body's physical nature, emotions are human nature, consciousness is sentient nature. It's all just the play of nature. There's no I in control. There's no I to own it.

And yet, why does it seem like there's an I? This is so curious—such a curious thing. It's not the same all the time. People have told me in interviews during this month, "Oh, there was a period of real openness, didn't feel an I present." And yet other times the I can be really strong.

This brings us to quotation 27. Ananda said, "Another monk told me when I was 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, consciousness."

That is, the sense of self arises when we cling to one of the aggregates. And if clinging isn't happening, the I sense isn't arising. So the sense of I is something that's not stable or ongoing. It comes into being when we take a hold. It comes into being when we cling.

How does it feel when you cling? What's the feeling in the body? There's a contraction, isn't there? There's a tightness. So the I is felt as a contraction. It narrows our world. It narrows our experience.

This is why opening to empty awareness is so powerful. It undoes the contraction. It releases the contraction of self and opens up to the vast awareness of the original mind. And that opening allows all the contractions that have happened over years, decades, maybe lifetimes—it allows them to unravel.

So this is a big part of the purification. All those karmic patterns can start to open up, move through in the empty space of awareness.

Notice—start to notice in your vipassana times, and you'll notice at other times too—when the I word arises, I or my, does it ever arise by itself? Does it ever just pop out of nowhere and go, "me"? Or does it always arise in relation to something else? Like "my knee is hurting," "I'm hungry for lunch," "I hear a sound." Take a close look. I think you'll see the I only arises in relation to something else, when we've focused on it and taken a hold of it.

And the more we fixate on something, the more I thoughts proliferate. Grasping and I thoughts always go together. If you're hanging on to anything for any length of time, the I thoughts will proliferate around it.

So this grasping is more or less synonymous with creating the sense of self. And so we can also call it selfing.

Here's a quotation that's not in the study guide. I love it because it's one of these poignant moments in the discourses. The Buddha's talking to Sariputta, one of his chief disciples, and he says, "Whether I teach the Dhamma in brief or in detail, those who understand it are hard to find."

You get the poignancy of that from a teacher as great as the Buddha—those who understand my teachings are hard to find. And Sariputta, who's always encouraging, says, "Now, blessed one, is the time to teach the Dhamma."

There will be those who will understand.

And the Buddha, drawn out, says, "Well then, Sariputta, this is how one should train. In regard to this body and its consciousness, and in regard to all external signs, let there be no eye-making and no mind-making and no underlying tendency to conceit."

So conceit is this word *mana*, establishing a sense of self. But I like these instructions: let there be no I-making and no mind-making. The Pali words are *ahankara* and *mamankara*—I-making and mind-making. And it makes clear the I is not some ongoing thing. We make it in some moments. We make the sense of I or the sense of my in a moment. We create it. And the Buddha says, don't do that. Stop making I and my. That's how you should be training.

Well, that's kind of a high bar, because it's an old habit. But that's what he's telling us. The I is extra. When there's pain in the knee, we can just note pain. We don't have to say "my pain." When there's a strong emotion, like anger, we can just say "anger," not "I'm angry."

So notice when the sense of I is there and when it's not. And aim toward experiences where the sense of I is not arising. Empty awareness is a good place to begin to discover this.

So here's the famous instruction, which I'm sure you all have heard, from Buddha to Bahiya. Bahiya had come across half or more of the country of India to receive this teaching. He came upon the Buddha when he was on alms round, and the Buddha originally didn't want to give him a teaching because he was on alms round. But Bahiya asked three times. So the Buddha gave him the teaching very briefly.

And this is the teaching: "Then, 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."

So this is pointing to the extraordinary freedom that's available seeing the emptiness of self. When we perceive the world as empty of self, there is this great freedom that's the end of suffering—at least

temporarily, the end of suffering. So this is the promise of the emptiness of self.

Then the other half is the emptiness of phenomena. So we want to look into that a little bit. And I'm going to start with a discourse from the *Samyutta Nikaya*. The main gist of which is on page 8 in your study guide, quote number 46. But I just want to give the introduction.

This is from the *Samyutta Nikaya*. 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. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it.

It would appear to that person to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of material form there is, a practitioner inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it. It would appear to that person to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in material form?

Well, if material form doesn't have substance, what does? Material form is the hardest thing we know. It seems really solid. And the Buddha is saying material form, all of it, is just like a lump of foam. You put your hands around it and it just goes pop. There's really nothing there. How are we supposed to understand this?

There are several ways we can understand this. One is that quantum physics has been telling us this for about a hundred years now. My professors in college, my physics professors, were all very clear on this point. Matter is mostly empty space, with the occasional stray electron or clump in the nucleus. Mostly empty space. I didn't notice that my physics professors were any happier than my other professors, however—except they were happier than those in the psychology department.

We know intellectually that matter is insubstantial, but how do we bring that into our direct experience?

One fall I was teaching a retreat at Spirit Rock. I was in the middle of a dharma talk in the evening when there was this loud cry outside the meditation hall—a loud cry like a baby in pain. A couple of staff members went out to see what was going on and I just continued with the talk.

When the talk finished, I went out and saw a group of staff standing in a small circle. I walked over and they were standing around the body of a deer lying on the ground with its head twisted back at a disturbing angle. The staff said the deer was dead. One of them explained that they had gone out and seen a couple of large dogs running away from where the deer lay. So probably what had happened was that a couple of dogs had attacked the deer. There are many deer around Spirit Rock, and occasionally these dog packs roam around Woodacre. I'd never seen that on Spirit Rock land before, but that's probably what happened. A couple of dogs attacked the deer and perhaps broke its neck.

We all stood around, did some metta for the deer for a while, and then dispersed. One of the staff called

the Humane Society, who said, "Sure, take the body down to the driveway at the bottom of the hill, and we'll come by and pick it up." So the next morning they put it into a golf cart and drove the deer's body down to the entrance. The Humane Society never came.

The retreat continued. Over the next ten days I would walk by the deer and observe its state of decay. Every day there was a little bit less of the deer there. We have coyotes, vultures, crows, ants, and insects all around Spirit Rock. All these beings were feeding on the mass of the deer. Until after about ten days, the only things that remained were the hide and fur, the hooves and the bones. That was about it. The rest had just been eaten. Form just went poof, like a lump of foam—gone, as though it had never been there before.

Another time, Sally and I went to hear some teachings from the Dalai Lama. He was teaching on the Heart Sutra, which relates closely to emptiness. In the midst of the discussion, he said that there are three kinds of dukkha. This is straight out of the Pali Canon, so he was very much in line with our teachings as well.

He said there's the dukkha of pain, which is called dukkha-dukkha. There's the dukkha of alternation, where something pleasant continues but then changes into something neutral or unpleasant. And he said the third kind of dukkha is called sankhara dukkha, the dukkha of formations. It means the dukkha of all conditioned arisings.

He said the dukkha of formations is that nothing is stable—everything is dissolving. And he said if you understand that things continue along for quite a while in a certain way and then they turn into something else, that's the wrong understanding. Sankhara dukkha shows that things are arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing, moment after moment after moment. Nothing is stable in our experience for longer than moments when you look at your experience closely.

This is the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned things. Nothing is lasting. This momentary dissolving nature can be found in meditation experience.

One of the purposes of concentration—remember we talked about the purpose and benefit of concentration is to see things the way they really are—is to see this dissolving nature moment after moment after moment in our direct experience. The body is a good place to see it. S. N. Goenka's whole meditation technique is directed towards seeing the dissolving nature of body sensations in a state of good meditation, moment after moment after moment.

We can start to see this in our direct experience of the body. Then we start to notice sounds also come and go really quickly. Smells and tastes are very fleeting, insubstantial. Thoughts come and go rapidly. Emotions may linger a while, but even when an emotion's there, it's hard to really get a firm grip on it. You can feel it in the body, but try getting a hold of a mind state all on its own without going through the body.

There's this other beautiful quote, number 47. This is a deva who's come to talk to the Buddha: "Having

seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise one takes no delight in form. The wise one takes no delight in form."

Further in this discourse on the lump of foam, on the top of the next page, the Buddha offers other analogies. Form is like a lump of foam. Feeling is like a water bubble. Perception is like a mirage. And formations are like a banana tree. If you haven't looked at the trunk of a banana tree, there's nothing solid there. It's just rings of green vegetation wrapped around each other. There's no heartwood. And consciousness is like an illusion. So explained the kinsmen of the sun. Consciousness is like an illusion.

Another expression of this is consciousness is like a magic show. Very interesting. How is consciousness like a magic show?

To explore this, we can see that sounds, body sensations, smells, and tastes are very fleeting, insubstantial. But sight is a little harder to see that in. Sight really makes it look like there's a solid world out there. When you look at a wall, you look at a rock, it looks really solid. So let's investigate the sense of sight.

If you're looking at a wall right now, remember the way that the sight of wall arises for you. There's light that's coming off of the lights in this room and a little outside light that hits the wall, reflects and bounces to your eye, strikes the retina, and then that stimulates a signal up the optic nerve into the brain where it gets interpreted and then somehow, boom, image of wall comes up. Somehow, right? That's a huge mystery. Nobody knows how that happens. The retina gets stimulated and sight of wall comes up. The neuroscientists don't understand that. The physicists don't understand that. The biologists, nobody knows how that happens. That's the magic of consciousness and the senses.

So the sight of wall pops up. Is that the real wall that you're seeing? Is that the reality of that wall? Or is it just a representation of wall that's been constructed by your sense organ and your brain? It's arising in your consciousness. It's a picture of a wall. Is it the same as the real wall? How could we ever know, right? We can only know it through our senses.

So we're living in this representation of the world and we think it's the real world. Let's be honest. We go around thinking, "Yeah, that's the real wall. That's the real tree. That's exactly what that tree looks like." But we're living in a representation of the real world. We don't know what the real world is, but we live in a representation constructed by consciousness and only existing, in our experience, in consciousness.

So this wall seems very stable and ongoing, but what if the flood of photons to your eye stops? What if the light is all cut off? Does the image of the wall remain? No. The image of the wall is not solid. It's being recreated thousands of times a second by the impact of many, many photons and the transmittal of that nerve signal over and over again to the brain and the reinterpretation.

So this image is actually not stable. The image of the wall that looks so solid is being recreated hundreds of times a second by the activity of the photons landing on the retina and the nerve traveling up to the brain. It's just being regenerated again and again and again, and it's only in consciousness. There's nothing stable

or solid in that at all. It could vanish in a moment. So the sight is also insubstantial. Even though it looks solid, the sight is not.

The wall is hard—that's for sure. That's the sensation of touch. And we know what that is: just electrons in one object meeting and being repelled by the electrons in another. That's why our hands can't go through each other. The electrons won't allow it. But that sense of hardness—that's just electrons, very fleeting.

Here's another one that I would have fun with. If I ask what color this book is, it's pretty clear, right? It's blue. Is it really? What's really happening from science is that light is reflecting off this book. It comes to your eye. It looks blue. But we know what's really happening. White light is hitting here. All the other colors are being absorbed and the blue is being reflected. White light has all the colors of the rainbow. The other colors are being absorbed. What's being reflected is the blue light.

So actually, if anything, this book is every color but blue, because it's pushing back the blue. And that's what you see. And you say, "Oh, that's blue." No. It's every color but blue.

So here's the other question. I used to ask this when I was first starting to investigate this: Where is blue? Is blue really an attribute of the book? Or is blue just in your mind? Blue's just in our mind. It doesn't exist anywhere but in our perceptions.

So all these aggregates are really insubstantial. You could almost say there's an unreal quality to them. There's a magical quality to them. This is how it's said in the Diamond Sutra:

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.

A dream.

Is there any difference in your experience of a moment in a dream and a moment in waking life? In just a moment, could you tell with certainty, "Oh yes, this is a dream," or "Yes, this is waking life"? Is there any real difference? Take a look.

This dreamlike quality of experience, when you realize that it is only an appearance in consciousness, gives rise to understanding the insubstantiality of all sense phenomena. They're fleeting, they're conditional, they're not the solid world we imagine them to be.

One of my teachers put it this way: "Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever." Instead of calling them objects, we begin to call them appearances. They do appear, but the substantial reality is not as we think it is.

This is the way in which consciousness is like a magic show, or consciousness is like an illusion. The appearances have a reality in our sense world, but they don't have solidity. Though consciousness is revealing them, it's our understanding or misunderstanding that gives them a solidity they don't really

have.

That's why the Buddha offered this wonderful teaching: "This world, Kaccana, for the most part depends upon a duality—upon the notion of existence and the notion of non-existence. For one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world."

Existence is the attribute we normally give phenomena—we really think this stuff exists. Yet the Buddha is saying that to assume existence is wrong, and to assume non-existence is equally wrong. Everything is just arising and flickering, arising and flickering.

These are the two primary meanings of emptiness that have been discussed in the tradition for two and a half thousand years. The world is empty of self—there is no one at the center to whom it's happening or who owns it. There's no one at the center we need to protect and no one who can control it. This leads to a deep letting go, an understanding of all the causes and conditions that are at work.

The beautiful thing about our awareness practice is that as we let go from the control of self, we have somewhere to rest. We have something to surrender into, which is the quality of empty awareness. As we rest in empty awareness, we begin to see—we don't have to investigate, we'll simply see. All the sense appearances that are coming and going don't have solidity either. They arise and flicker and pass, arise and flicker and pass.

As the mind gets steadier and steadier, this becomes more and more apparent. It's a purpose and benefit of concentration to see things the way they really are.

Let me close with this quotation from Suzuki Roshi: "Everything is in flowing change. Nothing exists but momentarily in its present form and color. One thing flows into another and cannot be grasped. Before the rain stops, we hear a bird. Even under the heavy snow, we see snowdrops and some new growth."

Let's just sit for a moment together.

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.

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