The Five Aggregates - Part I

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:26

Last night Gil talked about the Four Noble Truths and the Second Noble Truth, which points to the Buddhist teaching that the cause of our suffering—our optional suffering in this life—is craving or thirst or *tanha*, this incessant movement of mind that seeks new pleasure now here and now there, never being satisfied.

You could say that the Buddha delivered the discourse on the Four Noble Truths as his very first discourse, and the rest of his 45 years of teaching were really just a footnote to that teaching. Everything is contained within the Four Noble Truths, and everything that followed is a subplot of the Four Noble Truths.

But in other teachings, the Buddha drew an even more fundamental analysis of the cause of suffering and investigated why even craving was present in the mind. In tracing it back, he said that the root cause, the very most fundamental cause that anyone could discover or point to for our suffering, actually is ignorance.

Ignorance in the sense that the Buddha used the word doesn't mean a lack of facts or that we haven't been told enough. It means that we don't see properly. It means that we don't see things the way they are. And because of not seeing things the way they are, we suffer. We suffer because we live in illusion, because we misunderstand the world. As long as we misunderstand the world and ourselves, we're actually bound to suffering. This is what bondage means. We are bound as long as we are in ignorance.

The Buddha put this truth of ignorance very strongly. He was talking about ordinary beings and undeveloped practitioners like ourselves, and he said, "In whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that." It's a pretty strong statement. Why do we bother? Might as well stop conceiving, and it'll all be a lot simpler.

One of my earlier teachers, Christopher Titmus, who's quite given to provocative statements, put it this way. He said to a group in a dharma talk one time, "Everything you think is wrong. Everything you think is wrong." Often as people get into the deeper meaning of dharma and the deeper truths within dharma, they talk about feeling turned inside out, and that all their ideas and views get turned upside down and stood on their head.

Everything we think is wrong. This is really hard to keep in mind. It's sort of hard to keep functioning in the world and keep this truth in mind because it really undercuts our self-confidence. It undercuts our belief in our views, and sometimes we feel that we need our views to operate in life. Gil actually talked last night that clinging to views is one of the primary sources of suffering. So it's really in clinging to the

way that we see things wrongly that we set ourselves even further adrift.

I wonder if we can remember that we're actually at this moment, all of us, living in some degree of illusion, some degree of misperception, and to the extent that we live in misperception, not seeing truly. That's a very hard thing to remember. If we are willing just to keep that possibility in mind, it lends a real humility to our approach to life. We're willing to open to the possibility that we're not always right, unbelievable as that may sound.

The Buddha talked about different ways that this fundamental misunderstanding can be talked about. He said that it can be talked about as not seeing the Four Noble Truths. This is often the basic definition of wisdom or clear seeing—that one sees the Four Noble Truths and that is enough.

Another way the Buddha sometimes talked about this misperception was in terms of what are called the Three Characteristics—three aspects of everything that comes into existence, shared by all things that come into existence. They are the characteristics of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness, and of selflessness. He often said that we suffer because we don't see the truth of these three, and instead we believe that things last, that from the objects of this world we can find a lasting happiness, which we try over and over to do with them, and that we believe that there's a self somewhere in this whole fabric of existence that then has to occupy itself with bringing in pleasure and keeping away pain. Because we perceive these three wrongly, we get caught in grasping. And because we get caught in grasping, we suffer.

There's one other way of formulating the misunderstanding that you find a few places in the teachings of the Buddha, and that is in the concept of emptiness. He pointed in a number of passages in the Pali text to the truth of the insubstantiality of everything that exists in this life. This insubstantiality is a way of saying that things are empty, that they're more empty than we imagine them to be. So another way we could understand this wrong take on life is that we see things as being solid and substantial when actually they're not.

I'd like to talk a little bit about how the Buddha actually saw the world, how he understood himself, and by extension, how we can understand ourselves, and out of that how we can see the world in a truer way. I'd like to approach it through one of the categories that the Buddha used again and again to teach what are called the five aggregates.

These are five component parts, you might say, of a human being. When we look at a human being, we see a person, and that seems self-evident. But when the Buddha looked at himself or another being, I believe, he saw the five aggregates, not a human being. That is a different take on life. It feels different to see in that way. And when one sees in that way, the truths of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, selflessness, and emptiness become very clear.

So I'd like to talk about these truths tonight in relation to the five aggregates. But I have to put a couple of

disclaimers up front. One is that I feel a little shy to talk about emptiness because it's quite a profound topic. And I feel very naive on this particular subject because it is profound.

There was a young Tibetan Lama who was here at Spirit Rock this summer and led a retreat in Santa Rosa. His name is Mingyur Rinpoche. I don't know if any of you had the chance to meet him. He's twenty-three years old. And at the age of twenty-three, he has already done two three-year retreats in India where he lives in a monastery. He's a monk. And he's now been the retreat master—that is the head teacher—for another three-year retreat. And he's done all this by the age of twenty-three. So he started when he was about thirteen or fourteen.

When you meet him, when I met him, I felt that I was meeting somebody who had the wisdom of a sixty-year-old seasoned teacher. And yet it's in this very young body. He's really quite an extraordinary being. He's so light that you almost feel you could pass your hand through him. He feels transparent in that way. And yet he conveys the deepest teachings and manifests them through his personality.

So I took a walk—actually Sally and I took a walk with Rinpoche and his translator because he doesn't speak English. It was his first visit to the West. And we asked him what he thought of the West. Truth be told, he actually didn't want to come here. He would much rather have stayed in his monastery in India and practiced or taught. But he was coerced by his older brother to come. And so he came.

We asked him what he thought of the West. And he said, "Well, it's very clean. And it's very square." And that was all he would say about it. I guess he didn't want to offend us.

So I tried to get a little more philosophical with him. And I asked him about some different schools in Tibetan teachings. There's a school who follows the teachings of Nagarjuna, who was a great philosopher in the second century AD, called the Madhyamakas. And there's another school that follows the teachings of the Nyingma lineage called the Dzogchen school.

So I said, "Rinpoche, what's the difference between the Madhyamaka view of things, of life, and the Dzogchen view of things?" And his eyes lit up, because that's the kind of stuff he loves to talk about. And so he went on about a ten-minute discourse about the difference. But he prefaced it by saying, "The first thing you have to understand is there are eighteen different kinds of emptiness—eighteen different kinds of emptiness. And they're all spelled out in the texts of his lineage."

I haven't a clue what the eighteen are, although I have read a list at one point. So I'm just going to talk about a little piece tonight of emptiness, maybe half a kind of emptiness tonight, no more. Really just in relation to the five aggregates, the five what are called in Pali khandas. And the Sanskrit term is skandhas.

This term skandhas has somewhat come into Buddhist vocabulary and is the term that most people use if they want to use a foreign term for this. And the term khandha is not in very wide use, the Pali term. So I might use one or the other.

But the original term skandha actually just meant heap or bundle. And when we translate it as aggregate, it sounds very technical. "The five aggregates." Wow, that sounds really scientific. That must be something really arcane that's being pointed to here. I've got to put on my thinking cap to get this one, the five aggregates. It's like some composite of mineral that they're going to use to pave the driveway.

But when you think that the original term meant heap or bundle, it makes it more understandable. And actually the translation I like best for aggregate is "kinds of stuff."

So I take it that our experience in the way of rupa, or form, includes everything that we see, the whole physical world. I also take it to mean that it includes the way that matter interacts. So when one hand hits another, the sound that comes is also an aspect of form. When something tasty touches the tongue, the taste that arises is also a manifestation of the material world. When we touch something in the world, the sensation of touch that comes is part of the material world. When we smell a delightful meal from the kitchen, that smell is part of the material world. So I take it as the visual world and all the senses, the world of the five physical senses, basically.

The Buddha said that we don't see this realm very clearly. We don't understand it quite rightly. One of the things we often hear about the world is that it's kind of magical, that there's an awesome property to the physical world. There's a great mystery and there's a sense of magic with it.

So I thought I would start with a little magic trick. I never learned very many magic tricks, but I learned one. In the way of discoursing on magic, I would start with a little magic trick.

We have this deck of cards. As you can see, it's just an ordinary deck of playing cards. I'm going to ask my friend and Dharma brother, James, to pick a card out of the deck and not show it to me, but to hold it up and show it to the rest of you.

"Pick a card, any card. You can show it now to the group. Careful I don't see the reflection in the window."

"Now that everybody's seen it, you can slip it back in the deck. Thank you."

I'll shuffle a few times. I don't have a clue what card it was. But we'll do it one more time. Maybe I'll get it this time.

"Pick another card, James. Any card."

So please show them.

I found my calling! Now, will you put it back in the deck? We'll shuffle the deck—a good shuffle. Let me see. Is that your card? Is that it?

It's magic, isn't it? Wow. I'm impressed.

You know, these magic tricks are really amazing. The first time I saw this, I wondered, how did he do that?

Until you hear the explanation. And actually, I'll share the explanation with you.

It's a marked deck of cards—a trick deck. The cards are actually tapered. They're not exactly rectangular, but longer at one end than the other. So when the card gets pulled out and then gets turned around and stuck back in, there's only one card whose edge sticks out at one end. The reason it didn't work the first time is because James turned the card around and I turned the deck around. I didn't train my subject properly—that was my mistake. The second time, he turned the card around, but I knew not to turn the deck around. So when you run your hands across the deck, you simply pull out the card whose edge stands out.

Now that you know how it works, there's no more magic in it. It won't be a fun trick again. But when we don't know the secret, it looks pretty cool—pretty mysterious.

I actually saw something on television the other day that was like this. I don't know if you ever see pro wrestling when you're flipping through channels. Ever since that guy got elected governor of Minnesota, the stock of pro wrestling has gone way up in the world. It's actually an avenue into politics now, which isn't too surprising. Some of the politicians seem like they were dropped on their heads a few times.

What I saw while channel surfing was a demonstration of how they do the pile driver. One wrestler grabs another wrestler's head between his thighs and then appears to drive his head into the mat. It looks like the second wrestler's head is going to break or his neck is going to snap because he's being driven down head-first. They explained how it actually works: the wrestler braces his shoulders against the other wrestler's knees, and his shoulders absorb the whole blow. He doesn't actually land on his head. That's how they survive those moves. So the next time you're watching pro wrestling, now you'll know the secret.

The Buddha compared this life not to pro wrestling, but to a magic show. I want to read this passage from the suttas:

"Suppose that a magician or a magician's apprentice should hold a magic show at the four crossroads, and a keen-sighted person should see it, ponder over it, and reflect on it with wise attention. As he or she sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it with wise attention, he would find it empty, he would find it hollow, he would find it void of essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a magic show?

"Even so, monks, whatever form, whatever feeling"—he goes through the rest of the five aggregates—"whatever of the five aggregates there are, a monk sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it with wise attention. And as he ponders and reflects, he finds it empty. He finds it hollow. He finds it void of essence. What essence could there be in form and the other aggregates?"

The Buddha is comparing our experience of life to a magic show. When we can actually get behind the stage and see how the magic show is being put together, we see through it. We see how the display is created and we're no longer deceived by it. Not being deceived, it doesn't cast the kind of spell over us that it used to. It doesn't enchant us, as Gil mentioned the other day.

This seeing of the empty or unsubstantial nature of life is said to be a way to freedom. One of the most popular texts in all of Buddhism is the Heart Sutra. Near the beginning, it makes the statement: "The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress."

So this seeing into the nature of the five aggregates is not a trivial thing. In this very key text in Buddhism, the statement is that the perception of the emptiness of the five aggregates relieves us of all suffering and distress. I think there was a question the other night about why emptiness is considered important, and this is why. It has the potential for liberation, for truly freeing us.

I got into reading quite a bit about emptiness last fall. Actually, I was reading this central text by Nagarjuna called *The Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way*. It's in a new translation by Jay Garfield, and it's the most readable version I've found of this work. It's very good. I started to have dreams about emptiness during this period because the words were not just remaining as intellectual concepts, but they were really starting to penetrate my experience of the moment.

In one dream that came shortly before I woke up in the morning, I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, fully clothed in a normal outfit. The question that came into my mind as I stood before the mirror was: why is emptiness important? The answer actually came from the image in the mirror, and the answer was: because it means you don't exist.

It means you don't exist. The "I" that we take as separate and independent and not connected to the rest of being—that's the part that when we see emptiness, we see through its fiction. This separate sense of I gets dissolved. And because it gets dissolved, the self-concern that goes with it—the burden of supporting and feeding and caring for and providing pleasure for and avoiding pain for that separate self—gets dissolved also. This is the liberating potential of emptiness.

This statement that the Buddha made about the magician's show went on to include all five aggregates, which are form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. We'll explain the others later. And he added a poem that reads like this:

"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, a juggler's trick altogether. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun"—one of the names for the Buddha.

Form is like a mass of foam. Can you imagine that? A mass of foam floating down a river that's been stirred up by sediment or some pollution. You just see these bubbles drifting on the river's surface, and every once in a while a bubble pops and is no longer there. This entire physical world, the Buddha likens to a mass of foam. That's an incredible statement.

I think we are so conditioned by and large by the scientific worldview that it's hard for us to feel that in our bones. And I think there's a fundamental error in the scientific worldview that deceives us and has

cast a spell over us in this century. There was a question this morning about whether Buddhism is a religion. In many ways, I feel that the religion of our culture in the twentieth century is science, because science has defined for most people alive today in America what's true and what's false. Science provides for most of us our most fundamental worldview.

And science has a fundamental error in its take on the world. I think that most of the time, conditioned by this worldview, we take the physical world as being the ultimate truth of things. We take this world as solid and what really exists—this is the most fundamentally true thing that exists. And of course, the scientific worldview is that our life and consciousness is just a kind of random byproduct of chemical interactions among molecules that have existed for a long time in this physical reality. So in the scientific worldview, consciousness is an accident and a byproduct of matter.

This communicates to us that—and I think most of us live our lives this way, and I live most of my life really believing that this physical world is what's most true and that we are born into this physical world, we are trapped in this physical world until the time that we die, and then we leave this physical world. This is the scientific worldview, but I think it ignores a really fundamental truth.

And that is the truth that this physical world only appears to us conjoined with human consciousness.

There is never a moment when we recognize the physical world without it being held within our human consciousness. So rather than viewing the physical world as giving birth to human consciousness, the Buddha turned this around completely. He taught that the physical world is perceived only through human consciousness, and perhaps human consciousness is more fundamental. Maybe mind actually came first.

We're not going to definitively answer that question—the Buddha didn't really answer it either. But maybe that's closer to the truth. This understanding casts an entirely different light on our experience. I would maintain that the Buddha's description of the world as consciousness conjoined with impressions of the physical world is more truthful, more accurate, and more fundamental than the materialist view. Most importantly, it offers the possibility of liberation, which the scientific worldview doesn't.

Through this kind of examination, we can begin to shift some of our fundamental assumptions about the world and how we perceive it. Sylvia talked early in this retreat about opening up to new ways of perceiving, opening up to a new way of understanding the world. This is one of those understandings that can shift.

So how can we come to see that this physical world is like a mass of foam? We come to stillness in our meditation and begin to see the impermanent nature of things. We notice that sounds are just flickering on and off. Tastes become fleeting. Smells arise and pass away similarly.

Then there are two physical senses that remain somewhat opaque to us in the beginning: the sense of the body and the sense of sight. But as our meditation deepens, as stillness and concentration develop,

something remarkable happens. When we actually experience the body directly and inwardly—when our awareness becomes completely intimate with the body—we discover there's nothing solid there. The whole body, as felt from within through direct contact with awareness, reveals itself as pure flux, pure change. Its nature is pulsation, vibration, tingling, itching, pressure, lightness—all in constant movement.

From the very inside, we know experientially that there's really nothing solid here. We may refer back to our anatomy books from seventh-grade health class and believe that the body is full of bones, muscles, sinews, and tissues that appear solid. But when we actually turn to our direct experience of the bare physical nature, we see there's nothing solid there at all. It's simply pulsing on and off, moment after moment, with our awareness. Through this, we begin to see that the sense of touch reveals insubstantiality.

This leaves us with the sense of sight, which in some ways remains the most opaque. We look at the world and it appears completely solid. Change is hard to perceive. These walls have been here since we walked in, seemingly unchanged. So how can we see through the apparent substantiality of sight?

I'd suggest we return to our old friend science and deconstruct how vision actually takes place based on what we know scientifically. There's a source of light—currently the lamps in this room, or in daytime, the sun. Photons are scattering all over the objects in the room, being partially absorbed and partially reflected. The reflected light from all the different objects comes to our eye and lands on the retina. These photons carry energy that triggers cells in the retina, starting electrical impulses traveling through the optic nerve up to the brain, where they register.

Then comes the completely mysterious step that science has no explanation for: how that physical impulse gets translated into the actual experience of sight, into the consciousness of seeing. It's entirely mysterious. I don't know how that gap is bridged either, but we know that somehow it happens.

What we do know is that everything we see comes about only because millions of photons every second are impinging on the retina. Therefore, the image that we perceive is not a solid image at all—it's being formed microsecond after microsecond from these impulses to the brain. When we truly reflect on this, we recognize that the image we see "out there" is not a solid thing. The image I have of you is not solid—it's flickering on and off, microsecond after microsecond.

What does this understanding do to the seeming solidity of sight? It reveals sight as a magic show. These visual appearances arise as a magical display, as the texts sometimes describe it.

So we can feel the insubstantiality in sight, but we can take it a little farther. One of the things I like to ask is a question like, where is red? This sweater is red. In your experience, where is red? Does red really abide in this sweater? Is it in the nature of the sweater? Or is it only in your consciousness?

In actual fact, if you know from your seventh grade science about how light reflection works, red light reflects off the sweater into your eye because this sweater has absorbed all the colors of the spectrum

except for red. So the actual color of this thing is not red. That's how red is arising in your consciousness right now. So where is red? It's not in this, is it? It's only a display in consciousness. Only a display.

There's another way we can see some more insubstantiality in this situation. Sometimes it's described by people who know the teachings of the Buddha that our awareness is unbounded—virtually infinite, and extends as far as the farthest star. That this room, this land, the earth, and all the galaxies are actually included within our consciousness. And we have the idea that the awareness expands outwardly, physically, to reach the farthest star.

So let's think about that for a minute. We can go out under the night sky tonight, and it's not totally cloudy. We can look up and we can see stars. But let's think for a minute about how that seeing happens. Those photons also have been traveling a long way. The nearest star is five light years away. At light traveling 186,000 miles a second, that's a long way away. It takes five years to get here. So that light has been traveling for five years, and that impacts our retina. And here and now, that gives rise to the image of a star.

But that sight of star isn't five light years away. That light landed here, and that image is being generated now. That seeing of star is here and now. And you can bring it closer still. Everyone in this room is the same way. My image of Sandra is not actually over there. My image of Sandra is also here. Everything we see is actually here and now.

In the scientific or materialist worldview, we assume that awareness resides within space. But in the actual truth of things, as we see from the perspective of our human experience, space is only an aspect or something that we construct through consciousness, through awareness. So awareness doesn't reside within space. Space is an outcome of awareness. So again, I might say that awareness seems to be more fundamental than physical space.

So it's not that awareness is embedded in the physical world. Rather, the physical world is an appearance within awareness. So everything that we see is only an appearance. We assume that it's solid. We assume that it's substantial. But actually, there's no evidence for that belief. There is no evidence for that assumption.

So in our relationship to this world, if we want to learn from the point of view of emptiness, we can shift our vocabulary a little bit and not talk about the world as being made up of objects, but as containing appearances. So you might just play with that change in vocabulary as you relate to sights over the next few days—not taking the sight to indicate an object, but taking it to indicate an appearance.

That leads into the sense of magical display. That leads into the sense of the magic show that the Buddha talked about. It bears very strong resemblance to a dream. Just in this moment, in your experience of this moment, is there any real difference between your experience right now and your experience in a dream?

We can say dreams don't have the kind of continuity that daily life does. Dreams don't have the kind of

karmic repercussions that daily life does. Thank goodness.

But in our just-felt experience of it, is there any difference?

So that's why the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu could write, "I just woke from a dream in which I was a butterfly. Or am I a butterfly now dreaming to be a man?" These two worlds are not really so different.

One of my Tibetan teachers—actually Mingyur Rinpoche's brother—is a thirty-three-year-old lama named Sokny Rinpoche, also very wise, very young, very playful. And he said something rather devastating at one of the early retreats that I was on with him. He said, "In fact, everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever. Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever." Real in the sense of its being solid or substantial. The way we take the physical world to be, it's only an appearance.

We were talking about this in a group of senior students at Spirit Rock a couple of weeks ago. And one of the meditators had been working with this vocabulary shift—objects versus appearances—for about a week and reported in the next class how her experimentation had gone. And what she said about it was, "It's spooky. It's spooky, but I found it fascinating. I would look at everything, like this Japanese lamp that I love, and I'd see that it's only an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all just appearances."

When you go from an object to say that that's an appearance, then to a person and say that this is just an appearance, it can really make your hair stand on end. But I believe it. 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.

So this intuiting of the emptiness is not just a philosophical or intellectual speculation, but when it starts to penetrate our bones, when we start to get the feeling of what it means, it does evoke this sense of compassion. It's not a cold or philosophical inquiry, but it's an inquiry that really transforms the heart.

So let me talk just briefly about the mental components of the aggregates. There are four mental components in addition to the physical component.

The first of them is called feeling. But it doesn't mean emotion the way we usually think of feeling. The better translation probably is feeling tone. The Pali word is vedanā. And it refers to the tone of feeling that every experience has of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

This feeling tone is a root issue in Dharma practice because it's on the basis of the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience that we act out our tendencies to greed, aversion, or delusion. We tend to be greedy or to hold on to those things that have a pleasant feeling tone. We tend to push away or withdraw from those things that have an unpleasant feeling tone. And the things that have a neutral feeling tone, we tend to ignore. We tend to go blank. We tend to space out on.

These influences of greed, aversion, and delusion are what keep the mind in turmoil and what keep us

from finding peace. They're all based on feeling tone. So it's the element in our experience that drives our craziness, you might say, that drives our turmoil, that drives our disturbance.

The fact is we can't stop life from showing its changing face of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Most of the time, we think that our happiness is bound with that change. When our experience is pleasant, we're happy. When it's unpleasant, we're unhappy. And when it's neutral, we're kind of blah. We tend to be bored.

If we live our lives that way, we're always bound to an alternation of happiness and sorrow, sorrowing when the happiness goes, when the unpleasant comes. So it's very important to find a freedom that is not bound to the feeling tone. And that's the freedom that mindfulness offers, an awareness that can be with the pleasant and the unpleasant and not be moved by them, not be tied to them.

The second element in the mental factors is called perception. In Pali, the word is saññā. And here, perception means the factor of recognition or memory, that when I look out into the room tonight, I'm able to see men and women and chairs and pillows and walls and lamps and shawls. Perception is the element that operates from memory and organizes our visual sphere into things that we know and are comfortable with and familiar with.

We might think that this is just a spontaneous part of existence, but it's not. Oliver Sacks was reporting on a patient that he saw who had had his sight restored at age forty-five.

He had sight as a very small child and then had become blind, and at age 45 had an operation to restore it. That's miraculous. So everybody was waiting around the patient's bed. The man's name was Virgil. They took the bandages off, and the surgeon was there, his family was there, and Sacks was there. Everybody expected him to cry out, "I can see, I can see," because the operation was a success.

But here's Sacks' report of what happened. Virgil 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, meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur 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.

We take perception for granted, and it's a necessary tool for living, but it's not intrinsic. It's something that we learn.

The fourth of the mental components is called formations. The Pali term is *sankharas*, and it means the formations of mind—primarily thoughts, emotions, and images. But it also refers to those as they affect actions of speech and body. Sometimes it's called karmic formations. These are going on all the time within us. We feel them clearly in our meditation. They make up a substantial part of our experience. They're called formations because they're not intrinsic. They're rather thrown up in a kind of fabricated

way, moment after moment, by the mind. It's part of this projective quality of mind, this producing that goes on in the mind moment after moment.

The fifth and final factor of the aggregates is consciousness. Consciousness in the sense the Buddha used it in the five aggregates is used in a very particular way, and it means the knowing quality within every moment of experience. So for example, when you hear a sound, there are actually two components to that hearing. One is the sound itself, just that tone that's emitted by the bell. We could characterize it as an A or a C or a D or whatever. That tone has its nature. But there's also an element in you that's knowing that experience—not in a conceptual way, a totally pre-verbal way—but there's a quality of its registering in your mind. There's a knowing quality where your mind is meeting the sound.

Now these two actually come up together. The sound and the knowing of the sound arise simultaneously. It's a little hard to tease them apart in our experience, but there are actually two separate things going on in that moment of hearing. The way that you know there's a mental thing happening is because if I asked you ten minutes from now what was that sound like, you'd have a memory of it. The memory is only there because the mind knew it and stored it.

So these are the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. They're all present in every moment of experience. For instance, again in striking the bell, hearing the sound is the form aggregate. That sound will have a quality for you that you either like or don't like, or it's neutral. That's the feeling tone. Actually, that bell has quite a pretty sound. So for most of us, the feeling tone of that is a pleasant one.

There's the element of perception because you recognize, "Oh, that's the bell that ends the sitting." That's the recognition. It's very helpful when you've been sitting an hour and you hear that sound and you know that's the bell that ends the sitting, because then you can use that knowledge to get up and walk. And finally, there are the thoughts around the bell: Didn't the bell get rung a little bit early? When's it going to ring next? When's it going to ring for the end of this talk?

Is the sitting over now? And so forth. All these thoughts that come are the formations. There might be a resentment: "Oh, I think that bell should have rung ten minutes ago. The person up front has lost track of the time."

And finally, through all these experiences, there's consciousness. There's the mind that is registering all the different events—the sound, the feeling of the sound, the perception or recognition, and all the thoughts that are arising. Consciousness is what's revealing each of the other four aggregates. In every moment of our experience, all five aggregates are present.

So the Buddha asked about these aggregates: Is form permanent or impermanent? The physical world—permanent or impermanent? It's impermanent, isn't it? Sooner or later it will all pass. Then he said: Is what is impermanent possibly a source of lasting happiness? Is it possible that the impermanent

can give us lasting happiness? No, it can't.

So then he said: Is what is impermanent and ultimately unsatisfactory fit to be regarded as "I" or "mine"? He said no, it's not. Only something that would give lasting happiness is what we should regard as "I" or "mine."

In his teaching, he most often stressed how the aggregates reveal the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.

This is the way I would encourage you to work with the aggregates in your practice: to look within your experience closely with the steady eye of samadhi, with the steady eye of your meditation, and ask yourself: Is this impermanent? Is there anything within the aggregates that is lasting? And if there is not, is there anything here that can give me lasting happiness? And if there is not, is there any ground for believing in an ongoing and independent self? Is there any steady, stable "I" to be found within this field of human experience that we call the aggregates?

That is to be investigated and discovered. Is there a self?

I'll close with this quotation from Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Mun was one of the greatest monks of this century in Thailand. He was the teacher of Ajahn Chah and of Ajahn Mahabua, and a number of other great Thai masters. He was a wandering monk, a forest monk. He wandered in the forests of northern Thailand into Laos, into Burma for thirty years or more, teaching when he would be near a village, very dedicated to practice. This was taken from a poem that he wrote after his liberation, called "The Ballad of Liberation from the Five Skandhas":

"So in brief, there's suffering and there's the Dharma. Dharma here is the truth of freedom, the truth of our intrinsic freedom. Always with the mind. Contemplate this until you see the truth and the mind will be completely cool. However great the pleasure and pain, they'll cause you no fear. No longer drunk with the cause of suffering, the mind's well released. Knowing just this much is enough to soothe your fevers. The heart, knowing the Dharma of ultimate ease, sees for sure that the skandhas are unsatisfactory. The Dharma stays as the Dharma. The skandhas stay as the skandhas. That's all."

Let's sit for a minute.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.