The Five Aggregates - Part 2

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:25

A few nights ago, I talked about the five aggregates, particularly in relation to the emptiness of the material world, or what's called form. I spoke about how the Buddha said that form was like a mass of foam, empty and insubstantial. This refers to the whole physical world that we inhabit. Our use of language can reflect this understanding if we talk about appearances rather than objects—we get in touch with that insubstantiality.

Tonight I wanted to talk a little more about the five aggregates, particularly in relation to what Sylvia spoke about last night: the three characteristics. These are the qualities of everything that arises—being impermanent, being unsatisfactory or incapable of giving lasting happiness, and being without a self.

The fundamental question in practice, the fundamental thing we're trying to solve or see into, is the question of what am I? Who am I? What is a human being? What is this thing that we experience that we call life? This question has obviously preoccupied people from the time of the Buddha and before.

There are these lovely stories—Gil read one about the nuns who were practicing and the accounts of their deliverance, the accounts of their struggles. I wanted to read one other nun story tonight.

If you remember from the one he read in a talk early in the retreat, the nun was visited by Mara. In Buddhist mythology, Mara personifies the difficult forces of the mind—the hindrances. But actually, the way you hear Mara described in the old texts, it seems that people truly regarded Mara as a being—a being on some other level that would come and visit people. You can understand this being of Mara in two ways: one is just a kind of mythological archetype; the other is an actual being. I don't know which is true, but it's a really interesting figure in all the Buddhist texts.

So the nun Vajira, a nun of some understanding, as will be apparent from the dialogue, had taken her alms bowl and entered Savatthi, a town in northern India, for alms and came back to the grove where she was staying. After her meal, she sat down at the foot of a tree and began to meditate.

Then it said that Mara approached the bhikkhuni and desired to cause her fear and consternation, to make her hair stand on end and cause her to fall away from concentration of mind. Have you had any visits from Mara like that so far? That sounds kind of familiar.

So Mara came to the bhikkhuni Vajira and put to her this question that was intended to unsettle her: "Who put this living being together? Where is the maker? Where does this being come from, and where will it end?"

Vajira, being a pretty together meditator, replied immediately, "What's this 'being' you go on about? That's your delusion. We are nothing but the aggregates. There's no being to be found here. It's like this: A certain combination of parts is called by the name 'chariot.' So with the aggregates, the elements of mind and body, it's just common usage to say 'a being.' It's suffering that exists, suffering that endures, suffering that disappears. Nothing but suffering exists. Nothing but suffering comes to an end."

Then Mara, the evil one, thought, "Vajira knows me." And sad and dejected, he slunk away.

This is a very interesting reply from Vajira when she says, "There is no being here. That's only a concept. What's really here are the aggregates." This response takes us into a level that in the Buddhist texts is talked of as the level of ultimate truth and conventional truth. Gil talked about the level of thusness and concepts—this is another way to express that.

In the teachings, there are said to be ultimate constituents of experience that have a reality, a limited reality. The aggregates are among these things that have a true reality, that have a way of being. Others of the constituents that are said to be real in this sense are the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air, which really refer to qualities of body sensations. At first I thought the Buddha was being a really primitive chemist and saying that this is what makes up matter. But these are the qualities that we feel in our body. The sense bases and their objects are considered true and real, and nibbana, the unconditioned, is considered to be a reality.

But the term "human being" is just a conventional description of these things taken together. There is no thing that is a human being.

The term human being doesn't point to anything that really exists. And Vajira mentions this analogy of the chariot. This is a classical analogy in the texts that's explored in an ancient work called *The Questions of King Melinda*.

There's quite an interesting story behind this. There was considerable interchange between ancient Greece and ancient India, and these Buddha images that we see today didn't exist at the time of the Buddha. Though we think of them as products of Indian art and culture, they weren't created until much later. There was no statuary 500 years before the birth of Christ. The symbols that were used at the time of the Buddha to represent him and the teachings were a footprint, a dharma wheel—an eight-spoked wheel representing the Eightfold Path—or sometimes a footprint with a dharma wheel between the toes.

It was only when Indian culture had contact with Greek culture that the Roman-Greek style of sculpture was introduced, and we began to see figures like this. This is actually a very European artistic tradition, even though now it appears quintessentially Asian.

One of these Greek kings was named Menander, who conquered part of India and lived there sometime after the death of the Buddha. King Menander was visited by an enlightened monk named Nagasena, and they engaged in a series of dialogues that were recorded. The name was slightly altered over the years, so

the book is called *The Questions of King Melinda,* though his actual name was apparently Menander, and he was indeed Greek.

So Menander was dialoguing with Nagasena, the Arahant, and asked, "Who is Nagasena? I see you before me, I hear your voice, but who are you really?" He said to Nagasena, "Are you your form?" And Nagasena replied, "No." "Are you your feelings?" "No." "Are you your perceptions?" "No." "Are you your mental formations?" "No." "Are you your consciousness?" "No." Because all of these are only fragments.

So the king said, "Well, maybe Nagasena doesn't really exist."

Nagasena's reply was brilliant: "King, you're a wealthy man. How did you come here? Did you come on foot or by chariot?"

The king said, "I came by chariot."

So Nagasena asked, "What is this thing you call a chariot? Is it the wheels?"

The king said, "No."

"Is it the axles?"

"No."

"Is it the pole that attaches to the horse?"

"No."

"Is it the sum of all of these?"

The king said, "Not really."

Nagasena concluded, "It's just this way with a human being. We can't really be said to be any of these components."

This is quite mysterious. We can see why we're not the individual aggregates, but why aren't we all of them put together? What we see in the description of the chariot is that a chariot is really just these individual pieces—the box, the wheels, the axle, the pole—that are assembled together in a certain way. If we disassemble them, we no longer have a chariot.

Consider a simple example: a pen. We look at this and say, "That's a pen." But if we start to take it apart, we have the individual pieces—the barrel, the refill, the cap, and so forth. Is this collection of parts a pen? Not really, is it?

If we put the pieces back together, then again we have something that we recognize as a pen.

So what we call a human being is only these aggregates that are assembled in a certain way and interact

in a certain way that give the appearance of one thing—a unity, an organism. But if you were asked to find the one part of you that "human being" refers to, there isn't anything like that, is there? So "human being" is just a concept. And in practice, we want to keep coming back to seeing the reality of our actual experience, which we can describe as the aggregates. That's what's real or true.

So in a way, this is seeing a level of emptiness in the human being. Another way that it's sometimes described is selflessness. And I know there are lots of feelings about getting into this concept of selflessness. So if this is really uncomfortable, this might be the time for the earplugs or the tuning out. But I wanted to explain a little about the relationship of selflessness to the aggregates.

And so what I want to do to get into it is to ask the question: what do we mean by this word "I" or "self"? Because the Buddha wasn't denying that there are beings, but rather that there's a certain way we use the word "I" or "self" that is being negated. So we really need to understand what that is first.

The sense I think we have of "I" is that there's something to which it refers that was there when we were born, has been there all throughout our life, is here in this moment, will be with us the rest of the life until we die—at least, if not longer. That there's some kind of abiding or ongoing independent part of ourselves that continues through time. It's like we feel that there's something at the core of us that is lasting. That in some ways, I'm the same person who sat in that second grade classroom and learned the fundamentals of arithmetic as the person I am in this moment. There's some sense of the continuing nature of an "I" that's gone through all those experiences.

And we also kind of employ it in this moment. We identify it as the one that's watching the breath, as though there's some entity that's separate from the breath that's observing it. Sometimes we talk about it as the owner of the body—as though there's a car registration made out to Guy Armstrong that this body is registered to. It's the one who hears sounds. There's a hearer of sounds in it.

This is the piece that the Buddha was negating. That there's some kind of unchanging core at the center of us that is the owner, that is the observer, that is the onlooker, that's separate from our experience. He wasn't denying our individuality. It's really clear that on a certain level of understanding there are individual beings, that we all feel different things, we perceive differently, we act differently, we obviously take up different space with our body. So that level of individuality isn't being denied or discounted.

One way of thinking about that is that each of us is a complete mind stream—a stream of mind and body. And that stream, you might say, has a continuity over time, but the individual components of body and mind stream are changing. And that this stream of body and mind is a little different than that stream, or that stream, or that stream of body and mind.

One way to understand this is: when the Buddha got enlightened, it solved his problem, but it didn't solve ours. So sometimes you hear this view in spirituality that "all is one." But if all is one, I would expect the

Buddha's enlightenment would have taken care of this mind stream also. So there's a level of individuality that's true that we don't really question. But within that individual stream, the Buddha questioned whether there's any kind of solid core that's unchanging.

So the question then is: given this stream, the experience of the aggregates, how is it that we build a sense of self? How does it come into being? One of the core ways that we do it is that we take the body to be self. We take the body to be "I," or we take the body to be "mine."

I don't know if you remember, but when the Buddha attained his understanding under the Bodhi tree near the town of Gaya, he almost didn't teach. It's said that he just abided in the bliss of freedom for seven weeks after his awakening. And he thought about not teaching. He said, "Nobody's going to get it. What I have discovered is too subtle, too hard to understand. No one will get it if I go out and proclaim it." So he almost didn't teach. Then he kind of looked over the world and surveyed the world and he said, "Well, there are some beings that don't have a lot of dust in their eyes, so I'll go offer this."

But this concern evidently came up for him at a later point too, because he was talking to Sariputta, who was one of his chief disciples. And he said, "You know, Sariputta, whether I teach the Dharma briefly or in detail, those who understand it are hard to find." So you get this sense of a little bit of unfulfillment in his sense of teaching, that it wasn't going quite as easily as maybe he thought it might. And Sariputta replied, "Oh, blessed one, now is the time for it."

Teach the Dharma briefly or at length and there will be those who understand. Because at least Sariputta understood. He was considered to be the Buddha's equivalent in wisdom. So the Buddha said, "Well then, Sariputta, this is how the training should be done. Concerning this body with its consciousness, let there be no self-centered imaginings of I and mine and no such bias. We shall then abide in the attainment of the heart's liberation and the liberation by wisdom."

This is a pretty powerful statement. Basically, as long as we believe that we are the body, we're subject to the fear of death. Because we know that the body comes to an end. And if our identity is tied with it, then there's the fear: oh, I also come to an end.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was a great Thai meditation master, one of the greatest Thai monks of the last half century. He died a few years ago. He lived very simply out in nature. Most of his life was spent in a forest monastery in the south of Thailand that had been given to him when he was a young monk. It still exists today. It's called Wat Suan Mok. For those of you who visit Thailand, it's a wonderful place to visit because you get the flavor of what living simply in the woods as a practitioner is like in Asia. It has a wonderful feeling, and it has a lot of his spirit there.

He was a very radical teacher for a traditional Buddhist country. He wouldn't allow any images of the Buddha on the property. People always kept wanting to donate these things, these statues of the Buddha, and he wouldn't have it. He didn't want people to get involved in the kind of ritual and devotion that

statues sometimes lead to. When we were monks, we would sit there in a big semicircle for the morning meal. And in the center of the semicircle, there were three big rocks piled one on top of another, decreasing in size. Those were as close as you could get to the image of a Buddha at Wat Suan Mok. He was very radical. He was very much on the wisdom side of things.

Living in nature, he felt that you could just abide in a quiet life and the qualities of nature would sink into your bones, sink into your marrow as you led a simple meditative life. You could learn a great deal from the trees, from the forest, from the creatures, from the weather, from the clouds.

What he said about this learning was that you came to understand that this body came from nature. It just came from the joining together of the seeds from our parents, the sperm and the egg, just a physical joining. Then the body was nourished by nutriments over the course of our life—food and water and air—and grew up. It still belongs to nature. It doesn't actually belong to us. It's never belonged to us. The body belongs to nature. It came from nature. Give it back to nature. And when we do, there's a tremendous relief in that.

This is a matter for insight, for seeing that the body has never departed from nature. We don't have to feel the burden of ownership.

So this is the self in relation to form. In relation to feeling, I think we talked about that in the meditation instructions. I won't spend more time on that.

In relation to perception, I'd like to talk a little bit about the arising of self in relation to perception. It's very interesting. Perception is one of the most powerful and most underrated faculties in our being. It is the faculty of insight, essentially. The deepest insights come not from seeing different things, but from seeing the same things differently.

Some of you this week have been reporting on seeing clearly the arising and passing—that is the insight into impermanence. We all sit down and can tell that body sensations are coming and going, and thoughts are coming and going, moods are coming and going, sounds, breath, everything's coming and going. But sometimes there's the very clear perception of that coming and going, of that arising and passing. It's not that we see anything differently, but we see that same constellation in a different way. And we know, really in our gut: all the facets of my experience are simply arising and passing. That's the power of perception.

Perception colors our fundamental take on the moment. It arises again and again in daily life and in retreat.

I heard this story this summer. John Kabat-Zinn, who began the mindfulness-based stress reduction program at UMass Worcester, has started to offer the practice in the military. They'd heard about the successes in coping with pain and increased clarity. Those instructions are going out into the military right now. I happened to mention this to Christopher Titmus, who is a very devoted member of the Green Party

and very active politically. His first question was, "Are they being taught the precepts?" Which is a very interesting point, because one could simply use the practice to become more efficient warriors.

One of the stories John Kabat-Zinn came back with was about a military officer who was living on a base and shopping at the PX, the grocery store on base. He was standing in line where a woman cashier was checking people out. An older woman came through the line holding a baby and reached the cashier. The cashier rang up the purchase, but then the woman with the baby started talking to the cashier, handed the baby over so the cashier could hold it and admire it and coo over it. They talked back and forth for some time.

The officer was getting impatient—tapping his feet, thinking "What's going on? I don't have all day." He grew frustrated and resentful. Finally, the cashier handed the baby back to the older woman, who left and went on her way.

But he had heard some training about watching your mind, not jumping to the first reaction that comes. So he was trying to be a little bit aware of his resentment and reactivity. When he got to the cashier himself, he struck up a conversation and said, "Nice baby."

The cashier said, "It's my baby. My husband was an Air Force officer killed in a training mission just a few months ago. I've had to find a job to support my children. I took this job. The woman who was here is my mother. She looks after my baby during the day and comes in a few times just so that I can have these few moments of contact with my baby."

The man's whole relationship to the situation changed—from reactivity to concern and compassion—all based on that shift in perception from seeing strangers to seeing a mother and a child.

We often perceive ourselves as unlovable or unlovely. That's really a deluded misperception. That's a flaw. Because we are all worthy of love. Every human being is worthy of love. But we forget that.

There's this beautiful poem by Galway Kinnell that expresses this. I think one of the functions of art is to shift our perception of the world and show us where we're mistaken or what we've forgotten. This is called "St. Francis and the Sow."

"The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower, for everything flowers from within of self-blessing, though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing, as St. Francis put his hand on the creased forehead of the sow and told her in words and in touch blessings of the earth on the sow. And the sow began remembering all down her thick length, from the earthen snout all the way through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail, from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine down through the great broken heart to the sheer blue milk and dreaminess spurting and shuddering from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths, sucking and blowing beneath them, the long, perfect loveliness of sow."

Perceptions can change in a moment. When I was on retreat this fall in Massachusetts, the chipmunks were really active. It was the start of fall season. The leaves were turning colors and falling, and the chipmunks were scurrying around all over the place, storing up food for winter. Then the maples started to reach their maturity and let down those little propellers with the maple seed in the middle. The chipmunks really seemed to love those. They'd go scrambling around everywhere.

We saw lots of chipmunks, and they're very cute—much cuter than squirrels, actually. They can hop so quickly and so high. They look like cartoon characters. So I got very fond of the chipmunks. Being on retreat, you get kind of mushy.

And I grew quite mushy about these chipmunks. Sometimes in the evening, when sunflower seeds or peanuts were offered alongside tea, I would sneak a little handful and scatter them outside for the chipmunks to discover the next day.

One day, while doing a mindful walk along the road, I came upon a dead chipmunk. It hadn't been run over, so its form was still intact. Seeing it there dead really touched me, moved me deeply. I began wondering what family it had been trying to return to when it died on that road. What were its connections? What beings missed it, noticed its absence? How did it feel in that moment of dying? It was very tender.

What really struck me was the size of its ear—so tiny, only about a quarter of an inch long, a delicate grayish pink. In seeing that ear, I realized the chipmunk had possessed all the same senses we do. It was so small, yet within that body of only six inches were all the same aggregates that we have. It had experienced its own life of pleasure and pain, fear and love of life, just as we do. It was a very moving perception.

A few days later, walking along a gravel path, I spotted a small crumpled form on the ground fifteen feet ahead. "Oh no," I thought, "not another dead chipmunk." Looking closer, I wondered: is that a dead chipmunk or just a pile of leaves? I couldn't tell from where I stood.

So I remained there, observing. When I saw it as a dead chipmunk, my heart would sink into sadness. When I saw it as merely leaves, everything felt neutral. The same sense data, yet I could perceive it two completely different ways, and my emotional response shifted entirely. Walking closer, I discovered it was indeed just a pile of dead leaves—much easier to bear.

We can experience these perceptual shifts in a single moment. Do you remember that old song "Silhouettes on the Shade"? A man walks around his girlfriend's block, approaching her door to knock. There's a light on in the living room, and two people are kissing passionately in front of it, their shadows cast on the window shade. He becomes despondent—his girlfriend is in love with another man. But then he realizes it's the wrong house. It's not his girlfriend at all. He goes to the right house and kisses his own girlfriend.

That shift in perception can feel like the difference between heaven and hell. In our practice, sometimes we see the glass half empty, sometimes half full. We can look at a moment of experience in meditation and declare, "This is a bad moment. I can't accept this. This is painful." Or in a millisecond, we can shift perspective: "Oh, this is okay. There's some discomfort here, a little pain in my body, but my mind isn't too unbalanced. Lunchtime isn't far off. I think I can make it through this." Suddenly it becomes acceptable.

The Buddha taught that a good practitioner can see the beautiful in a moment of unbeauty.

if he or she wishes, or the practitioner can see the unbeautiful in a moment of beauty, if he or she wishes. The reason for seeing them different ways is this: if we're caught in desire, then it's more skillful to see what's not so beautiful, to cut through the wanting. Or if we're caught in aversion, it's more skillful to see the beautiful, so we're not caught in hatred.

The fourth of the aggregates are the sankharas, the formations—the mental formations, sometimes called the karmic formations. These are the expressions of thought and emotion and image that usually express something with a sense of will. The reason that we don't feel peace all the time is that urges come in of wanting or not wanting that keep the mind in motion. We're kind of bombarded by thoughts that express our likes and dislikes and our hopes and fears. The mind doesn't feel peace often because of the impingement of these thoughts. This is what keeps us stirred up.

Well, these are also a way in which we really feel comfortable in the sense of ourselves being there. I get very used to my own particular patterns. I'm a fear type, as personality types go, so I'm very used to a thread of anxiety being present. And some complaining. When that's going on, I sort of think, "Oh, I'm really here now." It gets kind of reassuring. Sometimes when that isn't there and I feel like I'm not here, I sort of wonder where I am or what is going on.

So there are a few things to see with this. One is that we can hold on to a sense of self just through familiarity with these things. But the truth is that if we watch closely, these things also pass.

Suzuki Roshi had this beautiful line which explains why mindfulness is so potent for dealing with the afflictive emotions. He said, "Those who know the state of emptiness will always be able to dissolve their problems through constancy." If you know the state of emptiness, you can always dissolve your problems. Because you simply are patient and stay in the present until that particular mood or fear or anger or wanting or sense of hopelessness or despair or self-judgment passes away, which it will in time. And then you return to this state of balance and openness where nothing is really dominating.

That's true because the sankharas are basically these formations that occur temporarily and unexpectedly—as Silvia said in the talk last night, two useful words. If you forget all the rest of your dharma, you can remember these very useful words.

This is actually what brought me into practice. When I did my first meditation retreat in 1976 at Lama Foundation with Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg, I became totally hooked after

that ten-day experience. When I look back on what hooked me into the practice, it was feeling this sense of emptiness and feeling that it had the potency to uproot my suffering.

The particular suffering I was caught in right at that time in my life was a kind of fear and confusion. I'd sort of emerged out of the sixties as one of the walking wounded, with too much of everything that the sixties was famous for. When I found meditation, I felt that it was the one place where I could see that emptiness, and I could see the potential for anything being uprooted through the power of that openness.

This is one of the real healing properties of awareness—that it has the ability to unstick anywhere we feel stuck, anything at all, to reach back to that state of openness. So on the level of the emotions included within the sankharas, they're also temporary. They're passing and transient. And yet they provide a comfortable sense of who we are. If we look closely, we can see that that passes too.

But one of the last refuges of the self—one of the ego's last stand—is in the realm of thought. Even as we get really still in our meditation, and we may be connecting well with the breath, connecting well with sounds, with sensations, very firmly present in the moment, there can be this ongoing line of subconscious chatter: "Oh, I see what's happening now. Now I'm going to stay with the breath for a while. Oh, I got a few of those and then I spaced out for a while. Okay, that wasn't very good, but I'm going to come back. Now what I'm going to pay attention to is sounds because I feel I was too tight and I need some spaciousness."

We can keep this running commentary up even as we're connecting clearly to the focus of the meditation. And in this running commentary, we reestablish the sense of the separate observer. We create, as it were, this sense of observer by these thoughts that haven't been clearly looked into.

So this is one reason that we offer the awareness of thought as an important part of the practice. When we become aware of the thoughts coming and going, then we undercut one more place where the sense of self tends to take a stand, even in very subtle and good periods of meditation. So it's useful to be clear that the thoughts are also coming and going.

One place you can get in touch with that is to start observing the nature of your experience in between thoughts. The time when one thought has ended and before the next thought has arisen—what's the quality of that moment like?

That's a moment that's a little bit freer of this grip of self.

Finally, the last of the aggregates is consciousness. This is more complicated. For now, I'm just going to stick with the definition the Buddha used of consciousness, which is that it was the knowing that arose in relation to a sense experience—to a sound, to a touch, a smell, a taste, a thought, or whatever. When that sense experience went, the consciousness passed with it. So in that sense, consciousness is also arising and passing.

Yet what many people come and report in interviews is that at times when the meditation is steady, when

there's a sense of stillness and spaciousness, they feel there's a kind of presence there that's stable and ongoing. They feel that there's a quality to the awareness that isn't characterized by this coming and going. Is that consciousness or is that something else? There's a sense that all the mental components, all the physical components are coming and going, except this awareness seems kind of steady. So what's that about?

That's another talk. I want to mostly avoid that tonight because it's a big question. I'm going to come back and touch on it briefly at the end. For right now, I'll just say that consciousness has a little bit of a dual nature, a dual character. We can see the ways in which it's just conditioned and subject to arising and passing. We can also, from another angle, see that it has a quality of ongoingness. And we'll come back to that before we finish.

So we see that all these components of the aggregates are just arising and passing, moment after moment. In each moment, they come and they go.

So how does the sense of self get generated? Well, it gets generated out of a certain speed of these things happening. The five aggregates can all arise so quickly. A knee pain comes in. You're sitting, you're clearly with the breath. What we call knee pain comes in. By the way, that's a concept because knee is a concept. But you notice that there's this physical sensation arising about here.

You might notice the first thing is this sharp sensation. So that's the manifestation of the form aggregate and also the consciousness aggregate that knows that experience. Form and consciousness are there right in that moment. Then you might note there's an unpleasant feeling with it. You might note "painful." That's the feeling tone, the second aggregate. Then there may well be a perception of pain or stabbing. That's the third aggregate. And then you might start to feel, "Oh, my knee hurts." That thought might arise: "My knee hurts." That's sankara. That's the fourth aggregate.

Well, it's in that leap—"my knee hurts"—that the self is getting formed again. There's the ownership of that experience. Now, if we simply left it with "stabbing, stabbing," then the self is not being brought into creation again. But when we call it "my knee," all of a sudden, out of those bare aggregates, the I has come into being. So that's actually the moment of birth. The I has taken a birth at that moment. You are the owner of a bad knee. Congratulations.

Fortunately, birth also leads to passing away. At the end of the sitting, you get up, and that owner of the bad knee has gone away. Great. You can walk. It's comfortable again. Phew. That death was a relief.

Some deaths are not so nice. You're sitting in this really lovely, quiet space.

I'm having a great sitting. So you take birth as a good meditator. And with that, there's a feeling of satisfaction, of fulfillment, of accomplishment, of contentment. You get up and walk out. Maybe the walking meditation isn't so settled. Maybe the next sitting isn't so settled. Oh, that self dies—the good meditator dies. And that's sad. That's hard. It's hard to let go of that.

So in this constantly taking birth and passing away, there's joy and there's sorrow bound up in this process. The formation of I happens again and again in relation to the aggregates.

An interesting question to ask is: does the I ever arise without being tied to one of the aggregates? Does the sense of I ever come into being purely on its own? Can it stand alone? Can the I stand alone? Or is it only defined in relation to an experience among the aggregates? It's an interesting thing to investigate, so I'll leave that with you to take up.

You can see how over and over we form these conclusions, simple conclusions. I see a chair. I feel happy. I am a bad person. I am lovable. I'm feeling excited. All the different ways that we put the label of I on our experience.

The Buddha was asked once, "How does belief in a self come to be? How does this happen over and over that we form this view of the self?" And he explained it in terms of the aggregates and said that an untaught ordinary person—it's basically us—an untaught ordinary person regards form as self, primarily this body. So that's the sense "I am the body." Or self as possessing form: "This is my body." Or form as in self: that is, the body is a part of me. I'm bigger than the body, but the body is a piece of it. Or self as in form: I dwell within the body.

So these are the four options: form as self, self as owning form, form as in self, or self as in form. Then he goes through the same four formulations with regard to the other four aggregates, the mental aggregates. So he spells out twenty ways that the sense of self gets created. It's an interesting thing to reflect on. I think it pretty well covers the territory.

The name we can give to this whole process is identification. Identification is the labeling of I or mine on an aspect of our experience. What the Buddha said is that that I and mine is not intrinsic to the experience, but we give the label, and in giving the label, when we believe in it, we create that sense of self, moment after moment.

So the self is not an ongoing thing in any way, shape, or form, but it's something that we ourselves generate moment after moment after moment. That's why in Buddhism sometimes the goal is stated as the destroying of the ego, but that's completely false. As Wei Wu Wei pointed out, that's all well and good: catch the ego and cook its goose, but first you have to find it. And that's the problem, because there isn't really one. It's just this transient sense that comes and goes.

Nor are the aggregates altogether a self either. And that's something that's difficult to grasp. It's just a conventional term that we give to the joining. The way that all the pieces are put together, we give the term human beings, but that term human being doesn't actually point to anything that has its own existence. Just like pen is nothing more than a collection of the pieces of the pen. This sounds theoretical.

But what I want to say is that when we actually see in this way, it transforms our whole relationship to the world. I don't see this way all the time, but I see this way some of the time. And when I see this way, it's

tremendously freeing. When I see that there's no separate core to this life process, that this life process is one of constant flux, there's a tremendous sense of freedom and ease that comes in.

Something else happens that's really interesting, that shocked me the first few times I saw it: when I see myself that way, I also see other people that way. Most of the time I walk about and I see personalities, especially with people that I know. I look at James and I know, oh, that's my friend James. I know many things about him. He has a great heart. I have a lot of affection for him. I sort of crystallize him into something that I take for granted. But when I can see on the level of clearer seeing, I just see this impersonal process going on for all of us, all beings that I turn my attention to.

There's a very deep sense of freedom in that. And also what gets strengthened is our sense of connectedness. Connectedness doesn't even say it right. It's dropping down to the level where we actually are the same being. Or you could even say we're different limbs of the same being. We're connected somewhere down here, but we poke up as different fingers. We're joined at the base.

What I find so inspiring about that is that the whole purpose of practice then becomes not just eliminating the obscurations to seeing in this mind and body stream. The whole game becomes to eliminate the obscurations to awareness wherever awareness is found. It becomes the same game. This really opens our practice out to take in all of life, so that our practice just spontaneously starts to include practicing for the liberation of all beings everywhere—not as a theoretical thing, but as a felt sense, because we see that we are all the same.

Another aspect of seeing on this level is expressed in an ancient text, a classical text called the Visuddhimagga, where it says, "There is no doer of a deed. There is no one who reaps the fruit of a deed. Empty phenomena roll on. This view alone is right and true." There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. There is freedom, but there is no one who is freed.

Seeing in this way—there is suffering, but there is no one who suffers; there is freedom, but there is no one to be freed. In many of the Mahayana texts, you actually read statements such as, "There are no such things as beings, as separate individual beings." Somehow this sounds cold and off-putting, but the actual felt sense of it is one of great compassion. Because we see that we suffer because we all take up the belief in a personality or the belief in a self. Because of it, we have to protect it and defend it and nurture it. And in that, there's a struggle that doesn't need to be there. We've added something on top of our experience that doesn't need to be there.

I had a clear pointing out of this when I was a monk. In the Satipatthana Sutta, there's a whole section that deals with contemplations in cemeteries and charnel grounds—contemplations of dead and decaying bodies. The idea is that the meditator looks at what's happening to other bodies and then imagines what will happen to her or his own body.

In most of the world today, you can't find a charnel ground. It's considered unhygienic. So the modern

equivalent in Thailand is the autopsy rooms. As monks or nuns in Thailand, we're able to go and view autopsies. So I did that a couple of times and stayed in the room for a couple of hours each time.

I was about thirty-four years old. I'd never been next to a dead body in my life. So that was a complete shock for me. Not only did I get to stand next to corpses, but I got to watch them being taken apart. I got to watch the bodies being dissected. And they do quite a thorough job. I'm only going to do the PG-rated version of the talk tonight, but there is an R-rated version that is quite unsettling. I won't do that tonight.

So watching the bodies being taken apart for a couple of hours—and I'd been sitting quite a bit—

I was in a monastery in the city, waiting for my visa to come through. I'd been doing probably six hours of practice a day, and I walked out of there feeling quite sensitive. I felt that the experience had made a very strong impact on me.

I walked out into the street. The hospital was near the parade ground, the Sanam Luang in Bangkok, which is a very busy part of town, the central part of downtown. Lots of people lined up waiting for buses, kids playing in the park, couples holding hands and walking down the street, young people, old people, middle-aged people.

As I came out and looked at people, all I could see were walking corpses. That's all that I saw. And I was fascinated. I just kept watching. And it stayed with me for half an hour, an hour, something like that.

Then I reflected later: what did I mean by seeing walking corpses? What was that insight? The felt sense of it was that there were bodies which were no different than the bodies I had just seen taken apart on the autopsy table. But these bodies were different. These bodies were animated, and out from the eyes shone this brightness. These bodies had a brightness that the other bodies hadn't.

And this brightness was something to do with consciousness. So the consciousness was still there. And that consciousness, I realized, was not anything to do with time. This brightness was just purely in the present moment. It abided only in the present moment. It had nothing to do with past or future. It was just here and now.

It had the capacity to receive sense impressions through the doors, the five doors of the physical senses and through the mind. Through that capacity to receive impressions and this peculiar quality of memory, the brightness constructed a history. And it projected that history into the future. And out of those dual constructions, it created the sense of a self, a personality that was ongoing over time.

When in truth, there was only this extraordinary brightness purely in the present moment. Until we see through that construction of past and future out of the present moment materials, we're bound in the delusion that something continues over time. We're bound in the delusion of an ongoing personality.

What we are more fundamentally is the space in which everything arises and passes. This is the way of freedom. If there were only the aggregates, then we'd be bound on this wheel of arising and passing, of

taking birth in new forms and dying. But the Buddha pointed to a liberation just basically through the qualities of wisdom and awareness. This is the way forward, the way to freedom.

From Ajahn Mahabua: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, suffering, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration."

We could say that this is a substratum of awareness that's a dimension of our being that illuminates everything that arises but is itself empty. Because of this empty awareness, everything in the universe is accommodated. Everything has allowed its being of arising and passing. And yet this empty awareness abides with the quality of knowing.

What we are most fundamentally is this empty space, which has the knowing property. This is our deepest nature. This is what's sometimes referred to as our Buddha nature. It is lasting, it is not subject to arising and passing, but it's ungraspable. We can't identify it as a separate thing because it's the context within which everything takes existence. So it itself is beyond existence and non-existence.

This nature is, but it doesn't exist. It doesn't partake of time. So one way of saying is that it has always been, it is now, and it will always be.

But it itself is beyond change. It's beyond coming and going, and it's beyond birth and death. The Buddha taught that when we take our being in that dimension, then we are beyond the draw of death. Then we abide in the deathless, and this is the end of suffering.

To recognize and rest in this deathless nature is the ultimate fruit of the dharma path. It is not something we need to create or achieve, for it is already our deepest reality. Rather, it is something we uncover by releasing our grip on all that is impermanent, all that comes and goes, all that we have mistakenly taken to be our true self.

In this recognition, we find the peace that surpasses understanding—not because the world has changed, but because we have remembered what we truly are. We discover that what we have always been seeking was never absent, never lost, never threatened by the constant flux of experience.

This is the gift of dharma practice: to awaken to what has always been present, to rest in what cannot be disturbed, and to find in that resting the end of our long search for home.

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