The Five Aggregates (Pañcakhandha)

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:44

I think Howie talked last night about the three characteristics of existence—qualities that a number of us have pointed to over this retreat of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness, of selflessness. In a way, you could say that these three characteristics really point to the key understanding that the Buddha wanted to communicate. Throughout his years of teachings, he kept coming back and pointing to these three things again and again. I think the reason he was pointing so often is because they're linked to the source of our suffering.

He was really saying that we suffer because we don't see the world the way that it really is. The way that it really is is described by the three characteristics, but we find ourselves living in some degree of illusion. You might say that we suffer because we're all deluded. Rather than being an insult, this is actually just the typical human condition.

The Buddha talked another way about the fundamental root of our suffering being ignorance. Ignorance isn't so much that we don't have all the facts. You can go to a book of teachings from any religion and you can read the facts, the information, but ignorance is that we don't see things the way they are. We're blinded in some way. We live deluded.

The Buddha was talking about this issue of self as being such a central one. He said that in whatever way people conceive of self, the truth is ever other than that. You can't say it much more clearly. However we conceive of self, we're wrong.

One of my teachers put it a little more dramatically. This is Christopher Titmus, who many of you know has a great habit for speaking controversially and directly. Christopher's statement was to us: "Everything you think is wrong." That's a good one to wake a meditator up. This really has a beautiful truth about it, and it's really hard to keep it in mind.

We keep telling ourselves all the time the way the world is, the way that we are, the way that other people are. We know it so thoroughly. Because of this storytelling, we really believe that we know what's so. It's really hard to remember that we are living from illusion. Every one of us who has not completely let go of the concept of "I" is living in illusion.

It takes a lot of humility to recognize this. It's hard to keep that humility with us, to doubt the views that we hold to so often, and also to trust in our deepening wisdom. This is sort of the balancing act of spiritual practice—to trust in our wisdom and not to believe in our opinions. Not an easy balance.

So one of the ways that we get confused, one of the ways that we see wrongly, is when we look at

ourselves or we look at each other, we think we see a person. This is really commonplace, right? There are lots of people in this room here tonight, but I don't think that's the way the Buddha saw.

When the Buddha looked at a human being and described what he saw, he usually described it in one of two ways. One was that he saw six types of consciousness and six types of sense objects. These are really the foundation of our practice throughout our time together, whether you've been here for two weeks or for five weeks. We keep coming back to the sense doors—the sensations, the sights, the sounds, the tastes, the smells, and the objects of mind, the thoughts and moods and images. So six types of sense doors, six types of consciousness, six types of appearances. This is one of the ways that he described the human being.

But actually the way that he employed more often in his teaching when he wanted to teach understanding was a teaching device called the five aggregates. This is what I'd like to talk about tonight—this model of the human being called the five aggregates.

The word aggregate is a translation from the Pali word khanda. In Sanskrit, it's called skanda, and the Sanskrit is actually in much more common usage in the Buddhist world. So if I use a foreign word, I'll use the word skanda for the most part.

This word skanda, although aggregate sounds very technical, actually didn't have a technical meaning in India at the time of the Buddha. Skanda just means heap or bundle. That's all it means. You could look at a heap of sticks that are lying on the ground and you could call that a skanda of sticks.

So I think that the word that best translates skanda is not aggregate because it's so technical we think there's something really deep or complicated being pointed at. I think the best translation is the five kinds of stuff. That's the way I think of it. The aggregates or the skandhas are the five kinds of stuff that make us up, that make up what we call a human being.

They're usually divided into two groups. One group points to the things of the material world and the other group points to the things of the mind.

So another synonym for the five kinds of stuff is nama-rupa. Nama literally means name, while rupa literally means form. This is sometimes translated as "name and form," but a better translation for us is "mentality and materiality." Nama literally means name, and so it points to the fact that so much of the activity of mind is around naming and designation and terminology—the use of language. Then the world of materiality is the world of form. Rupa just means form.

So in the five kinds of stuff, we have on the one hand the materiality, and that is all included in this one aggregate, the one skanda called form or rupa. Then when the Buddha looked at mind, he broke it down into four different pieces for the purposes of this list. And those are feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. And he said, outside of these five things, there isn't anything. Everything that falls within our human experience can be classified into one of these five areas.

So I'd like to talk a little bit about how these things function and then go into detail about each of them. I'll give a simple example. In the world of materiality, if I strike the bell, you hear a sound. As you attend to that sound, the sound itself is of the material world. So it's an evidence, an instance of rupa. As that sound hits your ear, you hear the sound. The sound is form.

You have a feeling tone associated with it. It may be a pleasant sound, maybe an unpleasant sound. Because it's usually struck at the end of sittings, it's usually a pretty pleasant sound. It's kind of like the key that opens the prison door for us, so we tend to like that sound. So the feeling is usually pleasant.

And then sometimes when you hear it, you might just say to yourself, "Oh, that's the bell." That quality of naming it as a bell is perception—the act of recognition or memory, perceiving a specific object as the bell.

And then there might be thoughts about the bell. The thoughts might be, "I'm so glad the sitting's over." The thought might be, "That's a really nice bell." I often think—I don't know how many of you know this—this bell was donated to Spirit Rock by San Francisco Zen Center. And there was a day last fall when we had a teacher meeting here and Norman Fischer, who's one of the abbots of the Zen Center family, brought it around and taught us how to strike it. And it was a really touching moment because I felt like there was this transmission.

It came from Japan. It was cast in Japan. And he told us that they had some people who knew how to get really good deals in Japan. I don't know. He may have just said that to make us feel better because it's quite a nice bell. And he taught us how to strike it, and I'll show you the way that he taught us to strike it. He said you hold the striker at an angle and you just let it fall against the bell.

As I listened to him ring the bell for the first time, one of my perceptions was of Japanese culture. I kind of felt like what this gift was, was the gift of an ancient culture that had long studied and lived with the beauty of silence and the mystery of silence coming into the West, where we're just starting to appreciate that quality and all the richness of the sound of a bell. So that was one of my thoughts and one of the things I often think about with this bell is the transmission from that ancient culture.

And then also with the sound of the bell often comes a feeling of great ease. You often notice that at the end of a sitting, the bell goes and you think, "I could sit here forever," all of a sudden. So the thoughts about the bell, the feeling of ease, fall in the realm of mental formations. These are things that come out of the world of mind.

And then with each piece of this—with the sound, with its feeling tone, with the perception of it, with the thought and mood—comes consciousness. Consciousness is there at every step of the way. It's the quality in the mind that receives all that activity, that holds the activity and knows it.

And what's interesting about this way of looking at the human being in terms of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness is that all five of these are there in every moment of experience. They're arising at different sense doors, but all five of them are always present. There are some altered

states where some of these go away, but for the most part in our ordinary experience, all five of them are there. So it's a very comprehensive view. If we take the six sense doors, not all the six sense doors may be there in every moment, but all the five aggregates are. So it's a really good pointer to our moment-to-moment experience.

I'd like to talk a little about the aggregate of form.

When James put his card back, he turned it around so it went in the opposite direction. Now that card is thicker where all the other cards are thin. So I can feel for the thick card among all the thin cards, and that's his card.

So the mystery is gone once you know how it works. The trick depends on you not knowing how it's constructed.

And the Buddha said the five aggregates are like a magic show because they give the appearance of being a self, a solid, continuous, separate self. But when you understand how they work—how they're put together—the magic disappears. The illusion of self falls away.

Let's look at how this magic show works, starting with the aggregate of form. When you watch the world of sights, there's this feeling that you are here and the world is out there. There's a sense of separation, of inside and outside. But when you look more carefully at the experience of seeing, what's actually happening?

Light bounces off objects and hits the eye. The eye receives these light patterns, and somewhere in this process, the brain constructs what we call "seeing." But where exactly is the boundary between you and the world? Is the seeing happening in the eye? In the brain? In the object being seen? The experience of seeing seems to happen everywhere and nowhere at once.

This body that we think of as so solid and permanent—it's constantly changing. Every cell is replacing itself. The atoms that make up this form are mostly empty space. And yet there's this persistent sense of "my body," as if it were a fixed, separate thing.

The aggregate of form includes not just this body, but all material phenomena—the chair you're sitting on, the walls around us, the air between us. When you really examine it, where does "your" body end and the rest of the world begin? The air you breathe becomes part of your body. The food you eat becomes your flesh. The heat from your body warms the space around you.

The magic trick of the self depends on not looking too closely at how these aggregates actually function. It depends on the assumption that there's someone in here having experiences, someone separate from what's being experienced. But when mindfulness reveals how each aggregate actually operates, this assumption begins to dissolve.

And while he was showing you the card, I turned the deck around so that when he put it back in, the thick

end was at one end of the deck and I can find it by just running my finger up the deck and it comes out. So now you know the secret and now I will never impress you again. That's okay, it's all worth it. It's worth it for the insight.

So now I'd like to read you this comparison that the Buddha made of our existence—the human body and mind—to a magic show. The Buddha put it this way:

"Suppose, friends, that a magician 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. Even as she sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it with wise attention, she would find it empty. She would find it hollow. She would find it void of essence. What essence, friends, could there be in a magic show?

"Even so, friends, whatever form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness a practitioner sees—when she sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it with wise attention—she would find it empty. She would find it hollow. She would find it void of essence. What essence could there be in form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness?"

The Buddha closes the passage with a little poem, which he composed spontaneously as he often did:

"Form is like a mass of foam and feeling but an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and mental formations a plantain tree. Consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick and tire. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun"—another epithet for the Buddha.

I should mention this analogy to the plantain tree. I didn't understand it at first. The plantain is a kind of banana. If you know the way the banana tree works, as soon as it grows and sprouts a clump of bananas, it dies because its essence is hollow. A banana tree does not keep producing generation after generation the way most fruit trees do. It comes up once, it produces, and then it's gone. The mental formations are like a banana tree.

What the Buddha is pointing to in this passage is the sheer emptiness of this whole experience that we call a human being.

I want to talk a little bit about this teaching on emptiness because it comes in so often in the Buddhist tradition. The Heart Sutra, which is one of the summations of the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, has very near the start of it the line: "While practicing deeply the paramita of wisdom, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara—who's the Bodhisattva of compassion—perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress." That's a powerful perception. The very seeing of the emptiness of the aggregates, it's said in this ancient sutra, was enough to save Avalokiteshvara from all suffering and distress.

Last fall I was doing a retreat at home while reading quite a bit of an author named Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna is the author par excellence of emptiness in the whole Buddhist tradition. He wrote in about the second

century in India. Through twenty-eight chapters, Nagarjuna just takes apart the substantiality of not only our experience, but then the whole Buddhist path, so that what you had thought you might stand on instead of our usual experience also gets cut out from under you.

I was reading this while doing a lot of retreat practice, and as I was reading it, I started to have dreams about emptiness. In one of my dreams, I was standing in front of a mirror, and I obviously had the same question that probably many of you have. Standing in front of the mirror and seeing my image, this thought came up in my mind in the dream: Why is emptiness important? Because on the face of it, it just can seem like a philosophical idea. Does it really impact our lives?

So the question came in the dream: Why is emptiness important? And the being in the mirror spoke back to me and said, "Because it means that you don't exist. It means that you don't exist."

Now obviously it doesn't mean that I don't exist as a body or as mind states or as intentions and so forth. But what if this world didn't contain you as a problem? What if this world didn't contain you as a center of fear that had to be maintained and defended and protected? What if that kind of identity was taken away? Imagine the freedom and the spaciousness and the ease of life. That's the potential of the insight into emptiness.

In talking about emptiness, I want to go into it a little bit. I met last summer a really impressive teacher—one of the most impressive teachers I've met in my life—a Tibetan teacher named Mingyur Rinpoche, who's twenty-three years old and teaches as though he were a sixty-five-year-old enlightened master. At the age of twenty, he had completed two three-year retreats and led another group of people as the retreat master of a three-year retreat, all by the time he was twenty.

This is a fairly special being. It was his first trip to the West. I got to go around with him for an afternoon, and we asked him what he thought of the West, because it was his first time here. His answer was, "It's square and it's clean." That was kind of interesting. Coming from Kathmandu, or India, I could see why he meant that. But he was obviously not fascinated with the West at all. That's all he had to say about it.

I said, "Do you think Westerners are as happy as Tibetans?" He said no. He really didn't think so from the Westerners that he'd met. And he didn't have a lot of interest in talking about things on that level.

So we were going for a walk. We were actually walking around the top of Mount Tam. You probably know there's a nice circular walk that takes about twenty minutes. And I asked him, "What's the difference between the kind of emptiness in the Dzogchen school and the kind of emptiness they talk about in Nagarjuna's school of Buddhism?"

And then his eyes lit up. He got so excited. He sat down right on the spot, right on the path. We sat down with him, because he obviously wasn't going anywhere, and he started to talk to me about that answer. I received it through a translator. But the first thing he said in that answer was, "What you need to understand is there are eighteen different kinds of emptiness in our tradition. Eighteen different kinds of

emptiness." And then he went on to answer my question at quite some length. It was very interesting.

So of the eighteen kinds of emptiness, we're not going very far tonight. We're just touching on a little bit of it.

Let's just take a look at this line that form is like a mass of foam. That means this body and everything else we see out there. How can this be like a mass of foam?

To take a look at that question, I'd like us to reflect for a minute on our usual view of the world. You know, growing up in the latter half of the twentieth century, we've all been conditioned by a very scientific view of the world. Unfortunately, the kind of science that we've picked up, the kind we were taught when we were young and formative, was mostly nineteenth-century science because the insights of quantum physics and later physics haven't really permeated people's being yet.

The nineteenth-century view of science is that this world is the true reality. If you think about the Newtonian view of the way things are, this world is really seen as something solid. It's seen in a way—and this is what I'd like to point to—as an ultimate truth.

I believe that in the culture in which you and I have grown up, the assumption is that this physical world is the ultimate truth. We enter this physical world when we are born. We are trapped in it, completely trapped in it and embedded in it during our lifetime. And when we die, we go out of it. I think the assumption is that this is the ultimate substratum of things.

Now, when the Buddha looked at the world, he put in a different piece, a piece that I think is really important. And that is that everything we experience of this world, we only experience through the human senses and with human consciousness.

So in the view of the Buddha, we may never know. We probably can never know exactly what that physical world is or is like because we're always holding it with human consciousness.

This human consciousness is a really important piece because maybe—just maybe—that is more fundamental than this. And if that's true, it stands our worldview on its head. Maybe consciousness is more fundamental than this physical reality. Maybe instead of consciousness being embedded in the physical reality, maybe the physical reality is just an appearance in consciousness, just an appearance.

When we come to meditation, some of this sense of transparency starts to come through. We've always assumed that the body was solid, but as we practice and develop mindfulness and concentration, we start to see that the body is just the location of changing sensations that are arising and pulsing and throbbing and vibrating and then passing out of existence, one after another.

Despite the fact that our third-grade health book looked like there were solid things in here, when we look with awareness, it's all in flux. It's just change. Its nature is nothing but change. So we start to feel the insubstantiality of the body. We tune in very strongly to the insubstantiality of sounds, of thoughts, the

cloud-like nature of our emotions, of tastes and smells, how they're all just passing and drifting through.

This breaking up of solidity is one of the most notable features of a retreat, especially a long retreat. And I know that all of you have tasted it in some degree or another.

But there's one sense door that's really hard to penetrate with this sense of fluidity, and that is the sense door of sight. We look around these eight walls and they look so solid. The floor looks so solid. Even people look quite solid. How can we penetrate that seeming solidity of sight?

Here we can call on science to support our inquiry. Remember from your seventh grade science text how vision gets created. There are photons streaming out of the lights that are all around the room. These photons are bouncing off of every surface in the room and coming to the eye where they enter through the pupil and fall on the retina. That stimulates a nerve transmission that goes up to the brain and in reaching the brain, somehow mysteriously, consciousness is created. Consciousness of sight, seeing happens.

When you think about that, you realize that the appearance of these walls is only coming because photons are continuously striking the retina. And that means that sight is not at all solid, but it's just a flickering on and off of consciousness that's created by millions of photons impinging every microsecond, giving rise through transient nerve impulses to the brain, to some kind of vision, some kind of sight.

We can take it one step further. If you look at the sweater that I have on, and I asked you what color it was, everybody would probably say it's red. It seems really clear. But when you think about what that actually means, you're not saying anything about my sweater being red. It's actually the red light that's bouncing off the sweater into your eyes to create the impression of red. So actually my sweater is every color in the spectrum but red. And the red is what's bouncing off to you.

So when I ask you the question, where is red? What's the answer? Red's really not in this sweater, is it? Red's just an appearance in your consciousness. It's just a blossoming for a short period of time in your sphere of sight. There's nothing solid in this appearance red, just the trickling of photons and the striking of nerve impulses. This whole appearance that seems like a solid world is just a flickering in sight consciousness, nothing more.

We can take it a step further. I think I said in a talk a while ago that our consciousness extends out to the farthest stars. But when you think about it, that's actually a metaphor. What's actually happening is that light has traveled across five million years or so to strike our retina. And then our consciousness projects it as a small light that looks like it's out there. But that light is here and now. It's five million years old. We're actually not seeing the star. We're just seeing some photons that came from it a long, long, long time ago.

So we're actually not seeing the star. We're just seeing light from the star and that light is here and now. That flowering into consciousness is just here and now. Everything is just here and now.

One of the ways that you can work with this in your practice is to speak not so much about objects in our experience, but appearances, and not so much about objects of meditation as subjects of meditation. You can play with this terminology as you go throughout the day. Everything that arises for you is only an appearance.

If you see the world as an appearance rather than as objects, then the world takes on this quality that Kent mentioned this morning talking with Howie about a magical display. Everything that appears to our senses is just this magical display. How did it get here? We don't know. How does it keep functioning? We don't really know. How is consciousness generating our experience? We don't know that either. We just know that everywhere we turn, there are these magical appearances in consciousness.

You know, it's really like a dream. It's very hard to say in a moment of our experience how it is any different than a dream.

One of my teachers put it very directly in a way that was kind of shocking when he said, "Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever. No real existence whatsoever." In the way that we usually take things to exist, we usually take things to exist solidly. And then we start to realize that that feeling of solidity is just sense data transmitted through touch of hardness—that's all it is.

We were talking about this in a group of old students last fall, and one of the people in the class was Jean Lafond, who practices here at Spirit Rock a lot. I asked her, "What difference did you feel when you started looking at things as appearances rather than objects?" And this was her response:

"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 just an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all appearances. When you go from an object to say it's an appearance, and then to a person and say they're an appearance, it made my 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 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."

This is the felt sense of emptiness, this lack of solid substance within any of us anywhere in the world. And it brings more compassion and more wisdom.

The second of the aggregates is the quality of feeling tone, or vedana. We've talked about this a lot in the instructions—this quality of every moment of our experience being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. So I'm not going to spend a lot more time with vedana. I think we've investigated that extensively.

The third is the quality of perception. Perception here means to recognize. It has the sense of memory acting so that we have had to learn to recognize these patches of form and color as constituting walls, lamps, women, benches, chairs, men, and so on. It's not intrinsic.

Oliver Sacks has this beautiful story where he was witnessing an operation where a surgeon had restored

sight to a man who had lost it very, very young. This man was now in middle age and had learned to function very well as a blind person. When the bandages were removed from the individual at the end of the operation, everybody expected that if the operation was a success, the bandages would be peeled off and the patient would cry, "Wow, now I can see!"

It didn't happen like that. The bandages were taken off, but no cry of "I can see" burst from Virgil's lips. He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing, right 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 Sacks later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color. It was all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur came this 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.

Sacks goes on to say that Virgil never actually learned all that well to put the visual world together again, because these tracks in the brain seem to form best when we're really young. So this act of perception—he could never quite get right again.

As we see the world, so we relate to it. There's a story that Jon Kabat-Zinn tells. He's been teaching mindfulness-based stress reduction in the military at quite extensive levels from what I've heard. He was giving one training and heard this story from an officer who was in the training group.

The officer said that he was at the supermarket one day buying some groceries. He was standing in line and the cashier was taking quite a bit of time chatting to an older woman who had brought a child in with her. The cashier had rung up the woman's groceries and still kept on chatting. He was getting really impatient. "Why doesn't this woman move through? Why is the cashier spending so much time with this customer? I'm ready to pay for my groceries."

Why doesn't she get out of my way?

He was getting quite irritated, but with mindfulness-based stress reduction, he was starting to learn to be aware of his feelings, to label his impatience, to try and relax into the present moment, feel his body—all those good skills you've been learning.

He got to the cashier and he just thought he'd check it out. He said, "Well, you certainly seemed to have a nice chat with the customer in front of me."

And the cashier said, "Oh yes, that was my mother. You see, my husband died in an aircraft training exercise only a few months ago, and I have two small children. I've had to go to work now because his life insurance policy didn't leave us enough to live on, and that was my baby. So my mother babysits for me while I come to work here, and she brings my baby in a couple of times a day so that I can see it and check

how it's doing."

In that moment, of course, his whole relationship to the situation changed. Instead of the impatience, he just felt this great humility and compassion in the face of what the woman had suffered, the loss that she'd suffered, the difficulty of having two children without a father that she was still working with.

The basic shift that happened was a shift of perception—from perceiving her as an idle, careless, thoughtless worker, to seeing her as somebody who had a human life to live with a great deal of difficulty and complexity. Just in the space of a few moments, that shift of perception happened. His whole relationship to her was different.

Perception is a really powerful faculty. One Tibetan teacher said to a friend of mine that there are two kinds of insights that come in practice. One is when we have special experiences. Another is when we have just ordinary experiences, but we see them differently. We see them differently because there's been a shift in perception. He said the shifts of perception are actually more powerful than the experiences.

This has been interesting for me to reflect on. In the last few days, people have been coming in and reporting some really powerful meditation experiences, really moving and beautiful experiences. Someone mentioned that they were in touch with a stillness that was so profound that as it deepened, the very sense of an observer of the stillness—the observer went away because it got folded into the depth of the stillness as the stillness deepened.

A couple of people have come in and talked about very difficult memories and emotions connected with childhood hurt and abuse, and then coming through the practice and a great deal of work over a number of years to periods of happiness, contentment and acceptance. That's extremely moving. To be able to find that depth of contentment after a really difficult past is really nothing short of a miracle.

Someone else came in and talked about spending time in nature recently, spending three hours with a very full sense of being in the present moment, being one with nature without any sense of desiring anything. What a powerful experience—just to be completely here and without the confusion, the unsatisfying nature of desire.

So all these experiences are extremely significant and extremely important. And as you also are seeing, they all also change. They decay, they move on, something else happens. And we're often left with this question: what was the meaning of this experience that I had that touched me so deeply?

And what I think is important with these special experiences is to take a look at the fact that the experience leaves, but what really can transform is insight. And in those special times, how were you seeing the world differently? What did you learn from that altered state of being? How does the world look different to you from that vantage point, than from the ordinary vantage point of being caught in confusion or disappointment or upheaval? If you can get in touch with what you're learning from the experience, that will stay.

So one of the things we often recommend, if you can recall how the experience was for you bodily—how did you feel in your body when you were in that special place? That can be a doorway back to connecting with the experience a little bit, not to grasp or to try to recreate or out of greed, but so that you can let it unfold a little more and find: what did I learn from that? What did it show me that's new? How do I see things differently?

And then other people were reporting that their experience was going more and more to the ordinary. Instead of all the striving and strain and effort and working that was in the early part of the retreat, they found that they were just dropping into an effortless kind of mindfulness that felt quite unpressured, quite unforced, very natural, and they wondered if that had any value.

This is another really beautiful turning point. The real ordinariness of experience, but with just a sense of contentment and settledness and ease. You can really trust in that place. It is special. It may not feel very special. It may feel like you're just kind of in a very ordinary frame of mind, but you can trust with that effortless unfolding that it will deepen on its own.

The fourth of the aggregates is mental formations, sometimes called karmic formations. It means that there's some urge that's bringing them forward. Mostly these are thoughts, emotions, moods, and images. To a large extent, these are what we identify as personality. You know, our consistent mood—that's a happy person, that's a kind person, that's a sad person, that's a fearful person. And the kind of thought patterns that go with those things kind of define the personality to a large extent.

There's a conditioned quality to this patterning. Sometimes it's precisely what motivates us to come to practice—it certainly was for me. The first time I did a retreat, I was emerging from a period of profound confusion and fear. What I touched in meditation practice was a depth of openness where nothing was there from the beginning. I had that sense really clearly early on: nothing was there from the beginning. Everything was simply coming and going.

Suzuki Roshi expressed this beautifully: "Those who know the state of emptiness will always be able to dissolve their problems through constancy." This is the profound healing quality of meditation. As Sylvia spoke about the other night, there's that opening of the heart that comes when there's no longer outer pressure upon it. The heart becomes able to offer up and truly release patterns it may have been holding for years upon years. When the heart can let go of that burden of the past, it can enter this moment with such heartfulness, presence, and ease. We begin to feel what is pointed to by the natural peace and ease of the unburdened heart.

The last of the aggregates is consciousness—the knowing quality in each moment, the receptive quality that holds the sense data. It also holds feeling, perception, and mental formations; consciousness holds all of our experience. In every moment, there's the sense data and the knowing of it arising together. You can't really take them apart. The sense data may be physical, but there's always a mental component—our consciousness. Without this mental component, experience couldn't enter memory; we couldn't recall it

later. Yet we can—if I ask you to remember the sound of the bell, you can, because there was a mental receiving and storing of that sound.

This is a fascinating investigation for meditation: getting in touch with that knowing quality of mind that meets sense data. You can turn your attention to the knowing side rather than the object side. You can work with this through the breath, through sounds. This leads into the big mind meditation that Howie led this morning—turning attention to consciousness itself. This brings through the sense of insubstantiality to our experience, the consciousness side.

These are the five aggregates—our mental and physical components of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.

I'd like to share a story from a nun practicing at the time of the Buddha. Her name was Vajira, one of the nuns visited by Mara. As Eugene discussed in the retreat's first part, many Mara stories appear in the ancient texts. Mara—the embodiment of temptation, confusion, or evil—often visited practitioners, particularly nuns. Here, Mara comes to distract a nun deep in meditation, hoping to draw her from her practice.

Mara approaches and says, "Who put this living being together? Where is the maker? Where does this being come from and where will it end?"

But Vajira was no beginning meditator. She responded: "What's this 'being' you go on about? That's just your delusion. We are nothing but the skandhas. 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 skandhas, the elements of mind and body, it's only common usage to call it a 'being.' It is suffering that exists, suffering that endures, and suffering that disappears. Nothing but suffering exists. Nothing but suffering comes to an end."

What Vajira was pointing to is that when we take up the concept of self or being, we bind ourselves to suffering. There's really no difference between grasping onto a self and suffering. When we begin to see this clearly, we also see the way out of our suffering. If we don't take ourselves to be the body, if we don't take ourselves to be the owner of the body, then where's the problem?

Ajahn Buddhadasa put it this way:

He said, "This body came from nature. It's never departed from nature and it belongs to nature. So give back to nature what belongs to nature." It's a great relief.

We call it a being, but as we look closely, investigating its component parts, we only find form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. We don't find any solid center that we could call an "I." We create an "I" where there really is no evidence for one, and by holding on to it, we suffer.

One meditator described suffering simply as rope burn—holding on to what's slipping away. That's why it's said in the Visuddhimagga, one of the ancient texts: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers.

There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. Empty phenomena roll on. This view alone is right and true."

Empty phenomena rolling on. This is you and me. There's no one inside of this. Essentially there's the body, there's the consciousness, and there are our thoughts and feelings. That's it. There's no owner.

And yet, as Jean pointed out in the quote I read earlier, this kind of seeing actually brings out compassion, because we see how each of us has been caught, how each of us is stuck in this "I" view. And then we start to connect with this beautiful image of Kuan Yin, the other image on the altar.

Kuan Yin is the bodhisattva, the awakened being who embodies compassion. She's often depicted with many heads, many eyes, a thousand arms and a thousand hands. It's said that she can hear all the cries of pain and sorrow from every being throughout the whole world and has a thousand arms and a thousand hands to bring them relief, to bring us relief. She is the very embodiment of compassion.

But Kuan Yin is also a bodhisattva, and bodhisattvas are also not deluded about the nature of beings. Bodhisattvas understand clearly that there is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. And so while she cares deeply about the pain that each of us feels, she also knows that there's no one at the center of this who is suffering.

This is the beautiful balance of wisdom and compassion that grows out of this understanding of emptiness. And that's why she's left us this beautiful pointing of freedom in an utterance of hers, a phrase that I like a lot, and I'll close with:

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

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

So let's just sit for a minute.

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