The Five Aggregates

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:55

The subject of tonight's talk is the five aggregates. The Buddha taught all about suffering and freedom. In a couple of nights, Steve will give a talk on dependent origination, which will trace the origin of suffering in excruciating detail, and also, therefore, the way of freedom.

The beginning of the chain of suffering is this factor in the mind of ignorance—in Pali, avijja. This basically means that we suffer because we don't see things the way they are. We don't see the world the way it is. We don't see ourselves the way we are. We suffer because we live to some extent in an illusion.

The Buddha said, "In whatever way they conceive, the truth is ever other than that." Or as one of my teachers put it even more strikingly, "Everything you think is wrong." That's sort of a wake-up call, isn't it? Everything you think is wrong. You've probably seen that bumper sticker: "Don't believe your thoughts." This is why.

But this is hard to keep in mind. We might have an insight into this, but it's hard to keep reminding ourselves because we want to understand the way things work. We have a deep-rooted need for security, and part of that security is telling ourselves the way things work: the world is like this, that person is like that, I'm like this, and here's how things work. That's the source of clinging to views. We cling to views because we really want to know things are predictable.

This is from Rumi: "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." Does it ever strike you like that in the middle of one of these long days? What am I supposed to be doing here?

One way to investigate this sense of reality and illusion is to explore the question, "What is this mind-body process?" Who am I? Or what am I? This looking directly at the nature of our experience is really the heart of what investigation is about.

Usually when we look at ourselves or somebody else, we see a person. This is common sense. It's conventional understanding. It's a very reasonable thing to think. And yet, the Buddha said that this is not indicative of one who is skillful in investigation.

He says, if you were a skilled butcher and you were cutting up the carcass of a cow, as you cut it up—and you'd done thousands of carcasses before like this—you would not say, "chop, chop, cow, cow, cow." You would say "rump, sirloin, tenderloin, ribs," right? And when you put it out on the market, that's what you would say. You wouldn't say "cow, cow, cow."

So he said, in the same way, one who has really investigated this mind-body process doesn't just look at it and say, "Oh, human being." That's too crude a label. One who has looked at it closely has more refined knowledge than that.

When a Buddha looked at a being, I don't believe that he saw just a person. I think he saw in one of two ways. One way is a way that we've talked about a lot, which basically has to do with seeing our experience as the six sense bases—six internal and external sense bases. So the phenomena of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects, and the corresponding sense organs that receive those things. This is one way to describe the world of human experience. This maps really nicely into our meditation experience because we often are connecting with sounds or sensations or sights or tastes, thoughts, emotions.

But there's another teaching device that the Buddha used—and I would say even more frequently as a pointer to wisdom, to understanding what we truly are—and that is the five aggregates.

As we tune into this way of seeing ourselves, we essentially tune into the way the Buddha sees us and we tune into the enlightened mind. The reason that the five aggregates is a powerful description of our human experience is it's a way of seeing without ego. When we start to see without ego, we take out this false sense of self that we normally tag this experience with. So seeing along the lines of the five aggregates helps us to see without ego. It's really a direct pointer to anatta, to seeing the truth of not-self.

This model of the five aggregates takes a while to get used to, just like the concept of not-self takes a while to get used to. So tonight, if you're hearing about it for the first time or second time or third time, don't expect to have a radical transformation in your understanding. But as you hang out with these concepts over months and years, it really does start to change the way we see things.

Speaking personally, there has been a lot of freedom for me in seeing along these lines. The extent of identification being released has been really striking for me through this understanding. It's not just an intellectual exercise—it has a direct impact in our experience. Be patient and let the concepts take a while to sink in.

This term "aggregate" is a translation from the Pali word *khanda*. The Sanskrit word is *skandha*, which you may have also heard. "Aggregate" sounds very technical, like you're paving a road somewhere. The Pali word is not that technical—it just means heap or bundle. If somebody was carrying a heap of sticks on their back, that would be called a *khanda*. So "aggregate" is a little more technical than I like. We could say components—the components of a human being. But actually the translation I like best is "kinds of stuff." The five aggregates are really just five kinds of stuff that make us up. It's that kind of colloquial.

The five aggregates are material form (or we could just say form), feeling tone (our old friend vedanā), perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. All five of these are present in every moment of experience. This is why it's a nice map to understand. The six sense bases may be present or absent in terms of the sense phenomena—there may or may not be a sound, there may or may not be a thought. But

there are always these five aggregates in every moment of experience, so we can always connect to this model.

The first is material form. The Pali word is *rūpa*. I want to go through the five step by step and lay out what they are, and then we'll talk about them as they appear in a sutta.

Rūpa, or form, is sometimes translated as body, but its meaning is wider than that. It's all matter, all material form. This is from the Buddha: "Any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—this is the material form aggregate."

So it means all matter. It includes the body, but it doesn't stop at the body's boundary, which is an important point. We're not limiting the five aggregates in any way by the boundary of the body. It's both the body and beyond.

The most obvious meaning is sights—this is the way we probably most predominantly experience the world of matter. So sometimes *rūpa* is used to mean sights, but it also includes all the ways matter interacts. Sounds, tastes, touch sensations, smells are also part of *rūpa*. When the bell is struck and a sound arises, that sound is the form aggregate, part of *rūpa*.

The sutta that I want to read from a couple of times tonight is found in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. It's called "A Mass of Foam." I'll just read the first part of it:

"On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great mass of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be empty, hollow, and void of essence. For what essence could there be in a lump of foam?

'So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be empty, hollow, void of essence. For what essence could there be in form?'"

We'll come back to this later.

The second aggregate is our old friend feeling tone—in Pali, *vedanā*. As you know, because we've talked about it quite a lot, this is the quality that every sense experience has of having a component of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

We've talked about *vedanā* a lot, and actually it's great because I hear it in your interview reports frequently. People are really working with this quality of *vedanā* in skillful ways and noticing it often. The reason it's so important, of course, is that it's on the basis of feeling tone that the kilesas spring into action.

We develop greed for the pleasant, aversion for the unpleasant, and to the neutral we tend to react with delusion—we don't see it clearly.

So with the sound...

Generally, that's a kind of pleasant feeling tone. We tend to like the sound of the bell. The pleasant quality has to do with the response of our minds. It could be different from person to person. So vedana is considered a mental aggregate. And yet it's not in the sound itself, but it's in the experience—in our experience, the way we hear the sound. So it's kind of integral in there with our hearing of the sound. But it is conditioned, so what some people experience as pleasant, others could experience as unpleasant.

I like this story from a 7-Eleven store, I think in Southern California, which was having problems with people driving up into the parking lot and dealing drugs outside the store. So they decided to find an unusual solution to the problem. They started playing Mantovani music over the loudspeakers in the parking lot. Now, Mantovani was one of my mother's favorites, so I grew up listening. For those of you who don't know it, it's kind of muzak-y, syrupy strings doing rather emotional melodies. And as they started playing this music through the loudspeakers into the parking lot, the drug dealers hated it. My mother quite liked it. But the drug dealers didn't, so they vacated the premises, and that's how they cleaned up the parking lot with Mantovani. I have a feeling if we played it here, the hall would also clear out fairly quickly.

The third of the aggregates is called perception. The Pali word is saññā. And in common English usage, we often use perception to mean the bare sense experience. We might say the sound itself is our perception. But in the way we use it in dharma language, it has a little bit different and a little more subtle sense. It really has to do with recognition or memory. So it's the way that we categorize the experiences that we have.

If your eyes are open at this moment and you're looking around the room, you are probably recognizing things like woman, shawl, cushion, bench, man, zabuton, wall, lamp, door, etc. The recognition of those different elements is the factor of perception in action. Really, if you take another step back with your eyes open, you realize that all there is in the world of sight is just form and color. That's all the visual field is made up of. It's just different patches of form and color. But we've learned how to interpret what those patches are. Now, mostly because we've been doing this for so long, we've forgotten that there's a learned element here. And we think that it's just an aspect of reality. But that's not necessarily true.

Oliver Sacks, the doctor, had a patient who had been blind from a very early age. He had lived a few years with sight and then had gone blind, and a procedure, a medical procedure, was now available to cure his blindness. So Sacks was there when the bandages were unwrapped after the surgery, along with the surgeon, some members of the man's family, and everybody was waiting to see if the operation was a success or not.

So they gently peeled off the bandages from the patient's eyes. "No cry of 'I can see!' burst from Virgil's lips. He 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, all 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."

The story goes on—this is from "An Anthropologist on Mars"—the story goes on to say that Virgil's eyesight came back intact, but the circuits in his brain that learned to perceive never really came back together. And he found the visual world constantly overwhelming and confusing, and he was actually much better off with his eyes closed. So he never did regain that ease of perception that we all do so automatically.

So perception is a very powerful and underappreciated part of our relationship to the world. It's how we place the world into familiar categories and therefore how we organize it and then can relate to it. And as we see the world, so we relate back to it. Perceptions are not always reliable.

I remember one fall I was doing walking meditation down below the annex. I was walking down that walkway that goes to the tennis courts. I was almost down to the tennis courts. And I started to hear a marching band.

And it sounded like drums and some bugles were coming down Pleasant Street, moving slowly in our direction. I stopped and thought, "That's really strange. Why would there be a marching band coming down Pleasant Street in front of IMS?" I kept listening to what I was certain were drums and bugles.

Then, continuing to listen, I suddenly realized it was a garden cart with those big bicycle tires being rolled down the gravel path behind me. I had heard it as a band. So my perception was of a band, when in fact it was a garden cart.

Perceptions aren't always trustworthy. Yet many insights come from accurate perception. For instance, when we first start to realize impermanence, we're generally not seeing different things. We may be sitting and seeing the same old sensations, sounds, thoughts, mental states, images we always see. But suddenly—who knows where it comes from—we perceive the impermanence of the passing show. The same show it's always been, but all of a sudden the perception of impermanence is clear.

The objects may not change, but we see them in a new way. We see the pattern differently.

Sometimes we don't see things the way they are because of a label. This is a big teaching technique in some traditions. For instance, this thing is usually considered to be a bell. But if you saw it in a different context, could I convince you that it was a monk's bowl? A good-sized monk's bowl, but quite possibly. Could I convince you that it was a planter or a pot—an expensive one, but a very nice planter? Or could I convince you that it was actually a chapeau for a Russian doll that was statue-sized and fit on the head

something like this? Maybe.

When we get caught in the labels, we have a hard time seeing the thing for exactly the way it is—what in Buddhism is called its thusness or its suchness—because the label blocks it out. Zen makes much of this distinction and tries to get people to see through the labels and concepts.

As a Zen master once said, holding up a striker: "What is this? If you call it a striker, I will hit you. But if you say it's not a striker, I will also hit you. What is it?" I didn't do a lot of Zen practice because I had a feeling I was going to get hit frequently—which was, in fact, my experience in the little bit of Zen practice I did.

This is often the basis of koans. There's a story that comes from this. In the late seventies, two great masters happened to be in Boston at the same time: Seungsahn Sunim, a well-known Korean Zen teacher, and Kalu Rinpoche, one of the greatest Tibetan lamas of the last fifty years. People thought it would be fascinating to bring these two supposedly highly enlightened masters together and see what came of their meeting.

They met in a friend's house in Cambridge, with others observing. Speaking through translators, Seungsahn thought he would get right into dialogue in his Zen style. He picked up an orange they were being served, held it out to Kalu Rinpoche and asked, "What is this?"

Kalu was already fairly old at the time, so he just sat back with his sweet smile, doing his mala beads and reciting mantras. He looked at Seungsahn, looked at the orange, and kept doing his beads with that sweet smile.

This wasn't quick enough for Seungsahn, so he held the orange out again: "What is this?"

Rinpoche turned to his translator and asked, "Don't they have oranges in his country?"

Sometimes it's better if spiritual traditions never meet.

Perception is a great subject for investigation—noticing what you're perceiving and how you're making it fit into categories. Now, when we hear this bell, we recognize it quite easily not just as the bell, but as the specific bell that ends the meditation sitting. That's our perception: bell, end of sitting.

The fourth of the aggregates, the third mental aggregate, is called volitional formations. The Pali term is *sa nkhara*. This refers primarily to thoughts, emotions, states of mind, mental objects in general. Intentions are included.

For our purposes in meditation, we can focus mostly on mental objects. These are, to some extent, the fabrications of mind. The word sankhara means something that has been put together. These include mind states and thoughts, which get brought up, fabricated and projected, created, formed.

This category includes the beautiful and sublime states like the Brahma-viharas, love and compassion. It

includes the really intense and difficult states of mind—fear and anguish, desire. It includes the very refined meditative states of the factors of enlightenment. All the different colorings of mind states from subtle to gross are included in this category of sankharas.

Sometimes the translation here is "karmic formations," which indicates the strong habitual patterning that these formations are subject to, as well as the fact that there is some degree of volition or intention that underlies them. We haven't talked about this in a lot of detail, but as Joseph spoke about volition or intention as the seed of karma the other evening, I hope you get a sense that these wholesome and unwholesome states that come through the mind then form the karmic seed for wholesome or unwholesome consequences in our life.

For example, when we hear the bell, because it's usually at the end of a sitting, we may then feel a sense of ease or relaxation. That's a sankhara. The thought might come at that time: "Oh, I could sit forever." That's also a sankhara. These are the responses to the form and the perception of the sound of the bell.

The last of the aggregates is called consciousness. The Pali word is vijnana. This is the quality we referred to a lot during the retreat as knowing. Just that bare holding of our sense data is the function of consciousness or vijnana—the simple knowing of a moment of sense experience at any of the six sense doors.

So it's consciousness that knows the sound. It knows the pleasant feeling tone. It knows the recognition of that as a bell. It knows the sense of ease in the mind. It recognizes or holds the thought that arises: "Oh, I could sit forever." All are held by consciousness.

All five of these kinds of "stuff" are always present in a moment of waking experience. This is the basic outline.

Now, I thought this was a funny list for a long time. Here you have fundamental things like the body and consciousness, and then you have these slightly abstruse things like perception and feeling tone. I thought, why are those singled out? It didn't quite make sense to me.

As I hung out with this list and did more reading, I found there were other ways to frame it. In the Abhidhamma classification of experience, there are just three categories, not five: rupa, cetasika or mental factors, and citta or consciousness. These five categories could be collapsed into three. If you just toss feeling and perception into sankharas, we could talk about rupa, sankhara, and vijnana. That would be equivalent to the Abhidhamma classification.

At another point in the suttas, the Buddha describes this combination of nama-rupa, which Steve will talk about in Dependent Origination. The nama part is the mental piece of nama-rupa. It includes feeling, perception, as well as volition, contact, and attention. These other three factors could also have been broken out of sankhara, and we could have eight aggregates.

So whether it's three or five or eight, basically it doesn't matter. I hope you get that. It really doesn't matter. The important thing is that every aspect of your experience can be lumped into one of these categories. Everything we experience can find a place in one of these five categories. So it's a workable list. It's a list that we can use to look at our experience, analyze it, and learn from it. That's the most important thing.

As the sutta continues, the Buddha compared these five aggregates to a magic show. So I want to talk about that a little bit. This is the primary sense of this sutta, of a mass of foam—that the aggregates are like a magic show. Why is this important?

I want to tell a little story about one of the great magicians of the last hundred years, who was Harry Houdini. Houdini had this amazing show where he would go outside, get tied up, completely wrapped up in ropes and chains, and then locks would be put on those chains and ropes. His hands would be bound behind him.

And thus tied up, he would be dropped into a box that was kind of like a coffin—dropped into a wooden box, and the lid would be hammered shut with nails. And then that box would be taken and tossed into a nearby river.

So he would do this in European cities. I don't know if he was tossed into the Danube or the Seine or what, but he would be tossed into these rivers, which are usually pretty cold water. And the trick was that he would eventually surface.

So people would be waiting by the side of the river as the current flowed and the water was cold and the box had sunk to the bottom and Houdini was nowhere in sight. And one minute goes by and two minutes go by and three minutes go by. No Houdini. Is he dead? Has he drowned? And then pop. He pops up alive and breathing out of the water.

Incredible. Magic. How did he get out of that contraption? Completely unbelievable. So just imagine yourself as a person there by the side of the river being blown away by this fantastic display. How could this have happened?

Well, the tricks are several. First of all, Houdini had practiced a long time so he could hold his breath underwater. That was the first trick. He could hold his breath for up to three minutes underwater. The second thing is he'd gotten very accustomed to holding his breath and staying under cold, icy waters. So it just didn't bother him mentally, and his body could take it. The third trick is that the rope tying his hands was tied not very tightly. So he was actually able quite easily to loosen his hands. The fourth trick was that he had inside his mouth tiny wrenches that he would pull out and pick the locks. He was an expert lock picker. That was actually his greatest skill.

So in the dark, in the middle of this icy water, he would pick these tiny wrenches out and he would start working the locks that were around the chains and ropes that were tying him in. And he would undo all

the locks. And then he was still inside a box, and this is the final trick. One of the sides of the box was kind of a trick side. It was not nailed on tightly at all, and he could easily just push that side out. He didn't push out the top, which had been nailed shut. He pushed out this trick panel, and then he could swim to the surface.

Once you knew the trick, it sort of takes away the wonder of it. I mean, it's a great skill. It's a fantastic skill, but still, it's no longer magic. When you understand the way it's put together, it's not magic anymore. You're not deceived. You're not enchanted the way you were before.

So the Buddha said when we understand the way the aggregates work, we're not enchanted by them any longer. "Suppose, monks, 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 they see it, ponder over it, and reflect on it with wise attention, they would find it empty, they would find it hollow, they would find it void of essence. What essence, bhikkhus, could there be in a magic show?

"Even so, whatever form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness a bhikkhu sees, they see it, ponder over it, and reflect on it with wise attention. And even as they see it, ponder it, and reflect on it with wise attention, they would find it empty. They would find it hollow. They would find it void of essence. What essence could there be in form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness?"

And then he gives this little verse that kind of sums it up. To understand this verse, you need to understand that the trunk of a banana tree is hollow. A banana tree only grows once, and its trunk has no substance.

"Form is like a mass of foam, and feeling just an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and formations a banana tree. Consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick entire."

All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun—another name for the Buddha.

This is the sense of emptiness as it's talked about in both Pali suttas and Mahayana sutras. The greatest philosopher in the history of Buddhism is, of course, the Buddha. But the second greatest, I think, is an Indian philosopher around the first century A.D. named Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna wrote a treatise that was his exposition of the teaching of emptiness.

In one retreat I was doing, combining deep study with intensive sitting, I was working through this text by Nagarjuna. Different insights into emptiness kept arising, day after day, and the teaching began to penetrate very deeply, even entering my dreams.

One morning, just before waking, I had a dream where I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, looking at my entire body reflected back at me. As I stood there, I asked the question: "Why is emptiness important?" The answer came from the face in the mirror, which said, "Because it means that you don't exist."

Because it means that you don't exist.

This is the essence of emptiness. It means that we don't exist in the way that we normally think we do. Of course, the five aggregates are here—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. But there is no self within them. There is no separate self who is the owner or experiencer of these aggregates.

What dissolves when we see this truth of anatta is the sense of a problem within the five aggregates, a problem that we have to solve. Because there's no longer a center of fear or desire.

Jack Kornfield was visiting an old monk in Sri Lanka. The monk was very happy, smiling and laughing as he sat up on his bed. Jack asked, "What's the secret of the Dharma in your words?" The monk laughed and said, "No self, no problem."

That's what dissolves. Emptiness is the taking out of this problematic self. This is the typical meaning of emptiness in the suttas. Most of the time, this word sunyata means empty of self—it's equivalent to anatta.

Then the Mahayana philosophers and writers took this sense of emptiness further, developing the understanding that's pointed to in this sutta: the sense of insubstantiality. The body being like a mass of foam, feelings like a bubble, perceptions like a mirage, and consciousness like a magic show—this recognition of the insubstantial nature of all experience.

We get caught because we don't see how insubstantial the whole world of our experience really is. Because we think it's more real or more solid than it actually is, we tend to hold on to it. So seeing emptiness becomes a great support for letting go, for not clinging, for recognizing that nothing is worth clinging to because it's all so light.

Our usual worldview, at least in the West, is really formed by nineteenth-century science. We consider this physical world to be the ultimate reality—our basis for truth and reality. We see this as the context of what happens: we're born into it, we're trapped in it while alive, and when we die, we go out of it while it continues as the ultimate frame of reference.

But this particular view—the scientific nineteenth-century worldview—ignores a key truth: that our experience of this world is all held in consciousness, this factor of vijnana. All we know of this world is the way it's held in consciousness. There is no "this world" on its own. There is only consciousness and the knowing of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch of the physical world.

What if the truth is that consciousness is more fundamental? I don't want to say definitively that it is, but what if that were the case? What if consciousness was more fundamental than physical matter, and the scientists had it backwards? Maybe there's a path to liberation in taking a look at consciousness.

We begin to explore all this through meditation, and often the first doorway that opens is the body. We start to feel the changing nature. We look closely at the body and see there's nothing but flux there. We investigate sounds and tastes and mind states and thoughts, and we see they too are just coming and

going—very light, phantasmagorical.

We begin to understand the title of Milan Kundera's book: The Unbearable Lightness of Being. This quality of existence is so light, it's like a feather.

But there's one place where it's usually hard to see this kind of lightness or emptiness, and that's the world of sight. When we open our eyes, it looks really solid. It looks unchanging. It looks steady.

So let's use science to take a closer look at that experience.

We know from our science classes that we see because particles of light or photons are coming from some light source—right now it's the lamps. They're reflecting off the objects in this room, and those particles are striking our eye and touching the retina. As they touch the retina, they excite a nerve, the optic nerve that transmits a signal up into the brain. And somehow—and this is a total mystery, no idea how this happens—somehow the brain turns this into consciousness and a representation of the visual world. How that happens, nobody knows.

So we see that as we reflect on that, what we're thinking is a solid wall is actually being recreated moment after moment by these millions of photons landing on the retina, sending pulsations of nerve impulses up to the brain where it's being regenerated. The sight is being regenerated hundreds of times a second. This world that we think is solid visual objects is pulsing on and off, maybe hundreds of times a second.

When we stop to think in that way, we realize the wall isn't solid. It's just an appearance. And we don't actually know what is in the wall. We don't know what constitutes wall. All we know is this representation of it that we have through the eye organ that we call wall.

So we're not living in the real physical world, ever. We're living in a representation of reality that's constructed by our five senses and our brain and our human consciousness. That's what we live in. But we forget that. And we think, oh, that's the real physical world. That's a really solid thing. And it's not. We're living in a representation that hangs like a bubble in consciousness. It's much, much lighter than we think.

Sometimes we think, but it really is solid. I can touch it. It really is solid. But that's just the sensation of earth element. That's just the sensation through the touch of the fingertips with hardness, with solidity, with the earth element in matter. Only another sensation.

Sometimes we think that there's a floor, that there's actually a ground, because the earth is solid, the seat is solid, there's a ground below me. We forget that that ground that supports us is also held in consciousness. And consciousness has no ground. What's the ground that supports your consciousness? There's nothing there. This whole thing hangs like a bubble in the void. There is no ground.

So it can be helpful as we start to incorporate this way of looking to realize that we don't see objects, we see appearances. And these appearances are always held in consciousness, which is the lightest of all the aggregates. And that's why the Tibetans call this a magical display. It comes out of nowhere. It has no

ground. And yet it has these amazing qualities of consistency and lawfulness, beauty. And that's why the Buddha compares consciousness to a magic show. It whips all this up out of what? I don't know. Nothing.

In that way, it's also like a dream. Our waking life is really like a dream. And when you think about this, is there any real difference between a moment in a dream and a moment in your waking life? You can reflect on that. Reflect on it as you dream.

Now why is that useful? Because if we're in a dream and we know that we're dreaming, do we cling? If we know that we're in a dream, do you have a sense, oh, the people are going to stay forever in my dream? When a monster comes, if you know you're dreaming, do you have to get afraid? No. But we take this dream much more seriously, more seriously than we ought to.

It's also compared, this world of appearances is also compared in the text to a mirage and to a rainbow. When you look at a rainbow in the sky, it looks like something's there, but it's just a play of light.

There's nothing solid there at all. One of my teachers, Sogyal Rinpoche, said it this way: everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever. It is only an appearance. This is the sense of emptiness, the way that it's used particularly in this sutta and in the Mahayana suttas.

Emptiness does not mean a place where nothing's happening. It doesn't mean a blankness, a vacancy, an absence. It means more a sense of transparency, lack of substance, hollowness, transitoriness, openness. This is the way things are, whether we see it or not, in each moment.

In the Heart Sutra, it said: "While practicing deeply the pāramitā of wisdom, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was therefore saved from all suffering and distress." Classically, the insight into this truth has deep liberating potential. It is a key to not clinging, to not holding on.

So as you're here, continue to look really closely at your experience for this sense of transitoriness, insubstantiality, briefness, lack of solidity. All these conduce to not holding on.

If it's like this, where does suffering come from? The suffering comes, the Buddha said, because we tend to claim things as "I" or "mine." And particularly we form the view that "I am the body" or "the body is mine."

There's a quite poignant passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya where the Buddha's talking to Sāriputta, who is one of his chief disciples. He says to Sāriputta, "Oh, Sāriputta, whether I teach the Dhamma briefly or at length, those who understand it are hard to find."

If you've ever been a teacher, you kind of know the sense of that. It's hard to find people who understand what I'm trying to communicate. And there's a poignancy to the Buddha saying that.

Sāriputta replies, "Then, O blessed one, now is the time for it. Now is the time to teach the Dhamma in brief or at length. There will be those who will understand."

"Well then, Sāriputta, 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. With regard to external objects, let there be no self-centered imaginings of 'mine' and no such bias. We shall then abide in the attainment of the heart's liberation and the liberation by wisdom."

It's because we cling to the body as "I" or "mine" that the suffering comes in. The Buddha said many times, it's the fiction of the belief in "I" that causes our suffering, but all the time there isn't any "I" there. There's not an "I" to get rid of because it was never there in the first place. It's just mistaken perception.

One meditator put it like this. They said, "Suffering is just rope burn. Things are going through our hands very quickly and we're trying to hold on, but we can't. And so we get rope burn as they pass. That's all that suffering is."

This is from the Visuddhimagga: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. Empty phenomena roll on. This view alone is right and true." There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. When we see this, this is the source of deep equanimity—the deepest kind of equanimity. There is suffering, but there is no one getting damaged by it because there's only the rope burn of friction.

Some of this came through to me during my time in Thailand. I was very privileged as a monk there to be able to see autopsies. I went into a hospital in the center of Bangkok and sat in the operating theater. First I stood next to one of the dead bodies. I was thirty-two years old at the time and I'd never been next to a dead body. I was able to stand next to this body which had been brought to the autopsy room.

Then I could sit in the operating theater and the coroner did a dissection of the body. This will be an R-rated talk because this is the three-month course. The first incision that the coroner made was from one ear over the top of the head down to the next ear. Then what he did was pull the scalp to the front and to the back and essentially peel the face away from the skull. That was my second contact with a dead body, was seeing the face come off. He sawed the top off the skull to take the brain out in order to weigh it. Then he continued to open up the chest cavity and the abdomen and pull those organs out.

So I watched one autopsy. I watched two autopsies. I think I watched three autopsies that morning. And then I walked back to go on with my life.

I walked back through a crowded park in central Bangkok, a big parade ground. People were walking by—young couples holding hands, dogs crossing the park, people waiting for buses, families hanging out together. Normal life was going on.

As I walked out and saw all this, all I could see were walking corpses. They were all walking corpses. I thought to myself, what do I mean by that, that I was seeing walking corpses? It's just the same body as I saw in the morgue, but these beings still have a brightness, a vitality that shines out through the eyes.

But this brightness shining out through the eyes—I saw really clearly—it doesn't have any past and any

future. It's just a present moment brightness, an awakeness, an aliveness, a nowness. Because it has a capacity for memory, it can store up past and project into future and therefore create a sense of personality. But fundamentally, it was just bodies with this brightness. Bodies with this brightness.

We can see in this way through our meditation also. Try it. Look around sometime in the dining hall and imagine that what you're really seeing is bodies with the brightness of consciousness—bodies and consciousness. That's most fundamentally what we are. When we see this way, we see that we're all in the same boat. We are basically just the same human form with minor variations in this consciousness, which opens us up to the world of senses, which then becomes the ground for all kinds of feelings to come through us. We have the whole human package of feelings.

So we make lots of distinctions about gender and age and race and culture and personality. These are valid distinctions, but they're very secondary to this truth that we are fundamentally just body and consciousness—the same organism, every one of us.

This is from Rumi's teacher, Shams of Tabriz: "You, me, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions." Well, in the garden of vipassana, of clear seeing, these are also not true distinctions. We are one organism. We all face the same situation. We are essentially empty. There's no ground for this consciousness and this brightness.

When you start to see in this way, it's not a cold kind of vision, but it evokes a deep sense of compassion. I want to read a little bit from one of our senior students. When Sally and I were teaching in California, we had a class of senior students who'd been practicing some years, and we got into this theme. I asked people to report on their reflections. This is from one of the students in the class:

"This is spooky. 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 I went from an object to say it's an appearance to a person and say they're an appearance, it made my hair stand on end. But it's true, and it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see that she's changing all the time. When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're all so fragile."

This is really our human situation. We have this deep yearning for security and we're alive in this universe whose fundamental nature is empty, where there is no ground. This is our fundamental problem.

Quan Yin is the bodhisattva of compassion in the Chinese tradition who vowed to hear all the cries of the world. She tunes into the ten thousand sorrows and the ten thousand joys that we all experience, and she listens to all of those with her compassionate heart. She tunes into the suffering of the world.

But Quan Yin is not a beginning meditator. Quan Yin is a bodhisattva. She is a deeply realized being. She understands very well that there's suffering, but there's no one who suffers. That's the source of her

equanimity.

And that's the source of this beautiful balance of wisdom and compassion that allows the Buddha to sit in tranquility and peace of mind, and still be open to knowing all the suffering that exists in the world. Through seeing emptiness, the heart becomes less burdened. We feel less weight of the solidity of the world, and out of this freedom comes compassion.

I want to close with a quotation that has been attributed to Kuan Yin that beautifully sums this up: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

Let's sit for a moment in silence.

Through compassion, she trembles with sympathy for all beings, but because her compassion is accompanied by wisdom, her heart remains undisturbed. This is the profound teaching of the bodhisattva path—to love fully while understanding deeply the empty nature of all phenomena. In this understanding lies both our greatest freedom and our most authentic capacity to serve.

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