The Five Aggregates Are Empty

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:44

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The Buddha said many times that he only taught for one purpose: to understand suffering and the end of suffering. All of his teachings were directed to that end, and I hope we can hold tonight's talk in that spirit. The Buddha didn't construct philosophies in order to have intellectual debates with people. Tonight's teaching is meant to be useful in the direction of leading us out of suffering. Because it may get a little technical at points, I hope you will hold it in that spirit, which basically means take what seems useful from it and leave behind what doesn't. You don't have to argue with the Buddha. If you don't agree, you can just leave his thoughts to one side. Take what is useful and leave the rest.

In one of his key teachings called Dependent Origination, the Buddha traced the origin of our suffering back to this condition in the mind called ignorance. He said that because of not understanding things the way they really are—which is the factor of ignorance—we crave. And then craving becomes the direct result of suffering. He expressed their relationship in this way: "Obstructed by ignorance and driven by craving, beings have been wandering in this samsara since beginningless time."

Tonight's talk is going to touch on both these topics of ignorance and craving. Basically, we suffer because we don't understand things the way they really are, and we live in some degree of delusion. The Buddha expressed this in a very pithy way at one point when he said of us as uninstructed beings: "In whatever way they conceive, the truth is ever other than that." One of my teachers put it in a slightly more direct way. He said, "Everything you think is wrong."

So that's what we're going to explore tonight. And that's why this quality of don't-know mind, which was mentioned in the questions this morning, is so helpful. We often think, because of clinging to views—a tendency that we all have—we often think that we know the way things are, and we forget that we don't yet know everything. So it's helpful to remind ourselves that we don't yet know everything. I like this line from a Rumi poem: "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." This is a good spirit in which to approach our meditation.

Wisdom is the faculty that leads us to see clearly the way things truly are. The unfolding of this faculty and the insights that it brings are really the heart of what our meditation is about. So we're encouraged to investigate our experience in this very direct and penetrating way to find out how things really are. We need to keep a fresh and open attitude as we look, understanding that we don't yet know everything, and that's part of the reason for our bondage.

One of the questions for investigation that was also mentioned this morning in the question period was this basic question that can be phrased in a few different ways: Who am I? What am I? The form that I particularly like is: What is this? What is this—meaning the totality of our human experience. What is it really that's going on here? How does it hang together? How does it work? This is really what our practice is leading us to investigate.

Typically, in our current state, when we look at ourselves or someone else, we see a person. But one of our ancient texts, the Visuddhimagga, said this is a very uninformed way to view other beings. They said it's as though a skilled butcher was carving up the carcass of a cow. And in carving it up into different slices of meat, the butcher was saying, "cow, cow, cow," when in fact the butcher carves it up and says, "tenderloin, rump, sirloin, ribs," and like that. So this text says that a person who says "person" is similarly uninformed, and that one who has directly investigated with some depth this mind-body process would not say "person" any longer.

So what would one say? When the Buddha looked at a human being, he saw in one of two ways—at least he described in one of two ways. The first is in terms of the six senses. Let me read you an excerpt from one of the suttas:

"Bhikkhus"—bhikkhu means monk, but it also means anybody who's undertaking serious practice, so all of us for this week come under this heading of bhikkhu—"Bhikkhus, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life."

That's pretty bold, isn't it? I don't recall Marx doing that, Freud doing that, or Einstein doing that.

So here's the Buddha on the totality of life: "It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and touches, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality of life would not be speaking of something they knew about."

This is a profound description, isn't it? It encompasses the six senses and their objects, mapping beautifully onto our human experience and our meditation practice. We've been doing extensive exploration of the senses and their corresponding objects. The Buddha used this model primarily to instruct people in cutting through craving.

For cutting through ignorance, he more often employed the model of the five aggregates. This offers another way to describe the totality of our experience, but sliced differently. As we tune into this framework of the five aggregates, we begin to see the world, see human beings, see our own experience the way the Buddha saw. Understanding and seeing in this way leads toward a liberated mind because it provides a way of perceiving that does not include the I, the ego, or the false sense of self as part of the description. It is a non-ego-centered way of viewing our life.

Though this talk may sound philosophical and intellectual, I want to share that my own investigation and

reflections along these lines have been one of the largest sources of freedom in my meditation practice. This is something I've worked with extensively and that has had a profound effect in my life.

The five aggregates—the Pali term we're translating as aggregate is *khandha*. Many of you may know it by the Sanskrit term, which is *skandha*. It's simply a common word in Pali and ancient Indian languages meaning heap or bundle. Nothing esoteric or spiritual about it. If you went out to collect twigs for firewood and gathered them up, you'd call that a *khandha* of twigs or firewood. It means a bundle, a collection, a gathering.

When I hear the word "aggregate," it sounds rather technical to me—something that would be hard to wrap my mind around, requiring long contemplation before understanding. It reminds me of road-building material. The word "components" might be better, though even that feels somewhat technical. The translation I prefer is "kinds of stuff." These are the five kinds of stuff that make up human experience.

To name them: form (or material form), feeling (sometimes called feeling tone to be more specific), perception, mental formations (sometimes just formations), and consciousness.

Let me describe each briefly. Material form translates the Pali word *rupa*. Sometimes *rupa* is translated as body, but that's incomplete—it's much broader. For instance, this statue behind me is sometimes called a Buddha *rupa*, like the body or form of the Buddha. But *rupa* as it applies to our experience encompasses the whole of physical nature. Sometimes it's described as materiality, the realm of matter, or material form. I'll mostly use the short word "form," but understand what we're pointing to.

Here's the Buddha's definition: "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." It's all of physical nature, including this body, but *rupa* doesn't divide the physical world into "this" and "everything else." It simply sees all matter as part of the material form aggregate. Notice the phrase "internal or external"—in this categorization, there's no division into this particular part of the physical world we call "my body" and another part we might call "your body." It's all simply part of form.

Beyond sights, *rupa* includes other kinds of interaction among physical matter—sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. All fall under the aggregate of form. I find it interesting that we take this body for granted as perhaps the most important object in the universe. We've been very close to it for a long time, yet the way we know it is primarily through sight and touch. Of course, we can also smell it, taste it, and sometimes hear it, though most of those experiences aren't particularly pleasant. Nonetheless, they're available to us. But primarily, this thing we call body—which we take so for granted and cherish so deeply—we know because we've seen it and touched it. These are the two main avenues to knowing this form we hold so dear.

I'll use sound as an example throughout the evening to illustrate the other aggregates.

When you hear the sound now, that is an example of form or rupa, and we'll come back to that again with the other aggregates.

So I'd like to read from a sutta in an ancient book of the Buddha's called the Samyutta Nikaya. This teaching is called "A Mass of Foam," where he describes the nature of the aggregates.

This is the opening of the sutta:

"On one occasion, the Blessed One—which is another name for the Buddha—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 void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mass 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 void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?'"

The next of the five aggregates is called feeling, or more often I might say feeling tone. The Pali word is vedanā, and the term feeling here is not used as a synonym for emotion. It's a particular quality of every sense experience we have which has a nature of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in this element called feeling tone.

So when you experience a sensation in the body, a sound that reaches the ear, a sight that you see, an emotion or a thought, each of these will have a feeling tone associated with them which may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. This quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither is what's referred to by feeling tone or vedanā. It accompanies every type of sense experience.

Interestingly, the feeling tone is said to be a mental phenomenon, and all the other four aggregates are mental in nature.

When you hear the sound of the bell—that's a nice tone. Most of us would experience that as pleasant. Now, especially because it comes at the end of a sitting, it becomes really pleasant. So that's a little bit conditioned. Some of our reception of phenomena as being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither is conditional. That's a way of saying it's not intrinsic to the object itself, but it's our mind's relationship to it that creates it. And that's why vedanā is considered a mental quality or factor and not physical.

I'll give you an example of this. There was a 7-Eleven down in Southern California that was having problems with young people hanging around outside in the parking lot and dealing drugs. They were not a particularly welcoming crowd to the customers that the 7-Eleven wanted to draw in, so they were wondering how they could get them to move off their parking lot to somewhere else to do their drug dealing. They tried asking them politely and it didn't work. They tried other forms of harassment, and they didn't work.

So the idea they had was to play some music. The music they chose was Mantovani. Now, my mother brought me up playing Mantovani. You may know the swelling strings often applied to sentimental movie soundtracks. This was the nature of Mantovani's recordings, and she liked it very much. The drug dealers didn't. And so as they cranked up the volume on the Mantovani, the drug dealers found somewhere else to do their business. It was very successful.

So what my mother found as pleasant feeling tone, the drug dealers found as very unpleasant. So this is a mental phenomenon that happens with every sense experience that we encounter.

The third of the aggregates, the second mental aggregate after feeling tone, is called perception. The Pali word is saññā. In Buddhism, this word may be used a little differently than it is in Western language. It's been so long since I've looked at it outside of Buddhist context, I'm not entirely sure. But I have some sense that in Western language, or maybe even Western philosophy, perception will refer to a datum of sense experience. So we might talk about the perception of that sound as being the sound itself.

In Buddhism, the term is used differently, and this is pretty universal across all the schools of Buddhism that I know. The term saññā is almost always translated as perception, but the meaning of it is more like recognition. So that when we hear a sound, we recognize it as a sound—and in fact, the sound of a bell. When a friend walks up to us and we recognize them as being our friend, we know their name—that is a moment of recognition that is called perception.

As you look around the room right now, you may be seeing things as I do, which is perceiving in the space in front of us objects like women, chairs, men, cushions, floor, ceiling, fans, lights. These are acts of perception. Another way to say it is classification or categorization—taking what is essentially just a smear of form and shape and color and organizing it into categories that we recognize and know, which we then call objects.

Now, we've been doing this for so long and it's so habituated that we normally are not even aware that this is taking place. Sometimes, but rarely, we come upon something that we can't perceive and then we realize, oh, the brain is stuck here. I was in a monastery in Burma...

It was the first night I was visiting, and it was a very large monastery. They were feeding about 800 people a day out of the kitchen. I'd come in toward the evening, and they offered me some food, bringing me into the kitchen.

When I walked into this big kitchen with its stone floor, there was a mound of something sitting there. All I could tell was that it was green and it was a mound. Beyond that, I could not place it in any category I knew. I didn't know if it was vegetable or mineral. I presumed it wasn't a living animal, though they have some big frogs over there, so you never know.

I looked at it for a while and finally had to ask somebody, "What is that?" It turned out to be some kind of pea or bean that the laypeople had been shelling to prepare for the next day's lunch, stacking them up in

this big pile. But I couldn't tell. I couldn't recognize the peas or beans, couldn't see the shapes of the individual ones. I realized then that my perception had stopped at this point.

Sometimes we don't necessarily perceive things accurately. I was doing a long retreat here one fall, walking meditation down the hill from the meditation hall on the grassy area. As I walked very slowly back and forth, quite present, I started to hear this marching band coming up Pleasant Street. That stopped me. I just stopped and listened, thinking, "Why would a marching brass band be coming up toward IMS in the middle of autumn?" I sat and listened—I could definitely hear drums and brass instruments, and couldn't think what else would be making that sound. It kept getting louder and louder, just as though it was approaching.

Finally I turned around, and one of the staff members was wheeling a garden cart with big bicycle tires down the gravel path. It was the garden cart bouncing, the tires bouncing up and down on the gravel that was making all the sounds I was hearing as a brass band. My perception was not right. It wasn't a brass band.

That wasn't really problematic—I could simply turn around and see it. But the Buddha said where it becomes problematic is that we perceive things as being permanent that in fact are going to change. We perceive things as being a self that in fact don't have a self. Because of these misperceptions, we suffer. We'll talk more about that as we go.

It may be hard to remember a time when we couldn't perceive the world the way we do now. We forget that it's a learned activity. Many of you understand this much better than I do, but there's an interesting story that Oliver Sacks tells about working with a patient who was an adult who had lost his vision as an infant and then had it restored as an adult man through surgery.

When they took the bandages off, everybody thought the patient would exclaim, "Wow, how great to see again!" In fact, he had no idea what he was seeing. After some time of the patient waking up and looking blankly out at what Sacks called "an unimaginable tangle," the surgeon finally spoke to him. Only at that point did he realize that the white blur in front of his eyes must be his surgeon's face, because he recognized the voice. The man never really learned to perceive well again because the circuits couldn't be trained so easily as an adult.

This act of perception—recognizing categories—is very important. It goes on quite automatically, yet it is a central factor in our functioning and in our insight. So when this sound comes, we recognize that it is a bell. We recognize that it is a bell to end the sitting. That's the act of perception taking place.

The fourth of the aggregates, the third of the mental aggregates after feeling tone and perception, is the category called mental formations, sometimes called volitional formations. The Pali term is *sankhara*. This refers to the whole range of thoughts and emotions that are created in the mind, as well as the more subtle mind states generated from meditation.

A thought is a formation. A reaction of anger or desire or fear or doubt is considered a mental formation. The beautiful emotions that Susan talked about last night—love, compassion, and joy—are mental formations. The refined or more subtle meditative states of tranquility, concentration, equanimity are also considered mental formations. These are all conditioned factors that may be present or can also be absent in any given moment of experience. This is the whole realm of moods, emotions, thoughts, and states of mind that are part of our experience.

For instance, when we hear the bell at the end of a sitting, there are usually a couple of volitional formations that happen after perception. The perception is: it's the bell that ends the sitting. Often the volitional formation that follows is relief—"Oh boy, the sitting's over." Then there's often a sense of ease in the mind and the thought, "Wow, I could sit forever now."

You notice how much easier it gets after that bell rings?

So these are volitional formations accompanying the sound of the bell, the perception of the bell. The last of the mental aggregates is consciousness. This is the feature that Joseph described in his talk on the opening night—this knowing quality of mind. The Pali term is vijñāna. Consciousness is that which, in Buddhist understanding, receives, you could say holds, knows every sense impression. So it's consciousness that is knowing a sound, knowing a sensation, knowing a thought.

In the example of the bell, it is consciousness that has held the sound—which is the form aggregate—that knows the feeling tone, which is pleasant, that registers and holds the perception of bell, and that also knows the sense of ease or the thought, "I could sit forever." So consciousness is there with each of the other aggregates.

The understanding in the teachings of the Buddha is that each of these experiences arises together with consciousness. So it's not that consciousness is there waiting, and then an independent thing comes up and is known. Rather, the understanding is that the sound and the knowing come together, arise together as one unified experience which has two aspects. In this case, the sound is one aspect, the knowing of the sound is another.

So these are the five kinds of stuff that make up our experience in this model: form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. According to the Buddha, this is a complete set. That is, every aspect of our experience can be put in one of these five categories.

Now, why is that interesting? Or why is it liberating? I think the answer is that there is not a need for an I, for a self, either as a separate category or within one of these categories. There are only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. When one has examined the mind-body process closely enough and found that this is all that constitutes experience, then one knows from direct contemplation, direct realization, that there is no other thing called "I" to be found anywhere.

So there's no central self, no ongoing entity at the center of all this to whom it's happening, who is

experiencing it all, or who owns any of it. There are only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. We'll come back to this a little later.

Later in the sutta, the Buddha compares this production of the five aggregates to a magic show. What he's saying is that we have been enchanted by a magic show, and that's what creates our clinging to life. But once we understand how the magic show is put together, we aren't tricked anymore.

It's interesting to reflect on this in terms of magic. I was reading a book not long ago about Harry Houdini and how he managed his amazing escapes. I don't know if you've heard his story or seen people do things like this, but Houdini became very famous—I think it was in the teens or twenties of the past century—by these feats of escape. He would let himself be completely tied up. His hands would be bound. Chains would be wrapped around his body, locked with big metal locks. He would then be bundled up and put into a wooden box. The side of the box that was open would be nailed shut, and then the box would be tossed into a river where, of course, it would sink to the bottom. And then, amazingly, a few minutes later, Houdini would swim to the surface, to the acclaim of the viewers and the media and everyone else.

It seemed like magic, but in fact, every element of it was a clever device. Magic tricks are always much more interesting when you don't know the trick, but I'm going to spoil it for you and tell you the tricks.

The first trick is that the person who tied his hands bound them very loosely so he could wriggle his hands free. Even though it looked like they'd been tied well, he could wriggle his hands free. The second trick is that within his mouth, he had a bunch of tiny picks and wrenches. As soon as his hands were free, he could reach into his mouth, get the picks, and undo the locks that were holding the chains together. He was a very talented lock picker. He could do this in the dark, in cold water. Once the locks were off and he'd disentangled all the chains and the ropes that were binding him, he was still in a wooden box, but one side of the box was a false side. It was nailed on only very lightly, so all he had to do was kick it out.

But this whole procedure took about three minutes. So imagine you're on the bottom of a riverbed, there's water rushing over you, and you're under there for three minutes. The very first thing Houdini had to learn was how to hold his breath. He could hold his breath for a full three minutes underwater in a cold river. And then all that was left was for him to swim to the surface and be acclaimed and showered with riches.

So that's a magic trick. If you had known it, then all the individual steps were cool, but it was no longer magical.

The Buddha said it is the same with us in this magic show: "Suppose, bhikkhus, that a magician should hold a magic show at a crossroads, and a keen-sighted person should inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it. It would appear to that person to be void, hollow, insubstantial."

What substance, monks, could there be in a magic show? Even so, whatever form, feeling, perception, formations, or consciousness a person inspects, ponders, and carefully investigates, it would appear to

that person to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance could there be in form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness?

Form is like a mass of foam, and feeling just an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and formations like a banana tree. I didn't get this one at first. If you know banana trees, the trunk is hollow. And as soon as the bananas have flowered once, the trunk never grows back again. So it's a hollow tree, unlike most trees that we know. Formations like a banana tree. Consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun, another name for the Buddha.

So here there's a pointing to the emptiness, the hollowness, the void, insubstantial nature of all five aggregates. This is a lot to take in all at once and requires some reflection.

During one period of retreat, I decided I wanted to study and look into this quality of emptiness. So I read a book by a wonderful Buddhist author named Nagarjuna. This book was written around 100 to 150 CE. Nagarjuna, for my money, is the greatest Buddhist philosopher after the Buddha. His key book called Root Verses on the Middle Way has been translated into English in several good translations, so it's easy to find translation and commentary on this work.

I was doing quite a lot of formal practice of sitting and walking, and I was also reading this book, which is quite dense and philosophical. It was starting to get under my skin, and I was starting to see what Nagarjuna was pointing to. He has a way of everywhere you want to take a resting point on some ground, of cutting that out from under you. It's really a fascinating book.

One evening I actually had a dream about Nagarjuna, though it was about the book more than about him as a person. In the dream, I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, looking at my image in the mirror, and I asked the question, "Why is emptiness important?" And curiously, it was the image in the mirror that replied. The image in the mirror said, "Because it means you don't exist." End of dream.

That was a great message because, of course, it doesn't mean that form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness don't exist. It means that the owner of those, the bearer of those, the one who has the burden of the aggregates, doesn't exist in that way. There is no self that has to carry this burden. And when the self goes out of the experience of the aggregates, they're felt as much lighter. This doesn't happen in a continuous way, but it happens from time to time and there is a great sense of lightening up when that happens.

Jack Kornfield tells a story where he was in Sri Lanka visiting this old monk—I think he was a patriarch of one of the schools at that time. Visiting the old monk in his bedroom, the monk said, "I hear you teach something about this in America. What's your understanding of Buddhism?"

Jack said, "Oh, my understanding, my deepest understanding is within this whole mind-body process, there is no abiding self."

The old monk just laughed and laughed, and he said, "No self, no problem. No self, no problem." That was his understanding.

But for the most part, we don't quite see things in this way. We have this sticky sense of self that comes in. We don't see the magical nature of the display of the aggregates. How can we tune into that insubstantial quality that the Buddha is pointing to in this discourse?

Partly, I think our culture works against us. Western culture is founded on a pretty materialistic worldview. If I can speak for what I think is the common twentieth or even twenty-first century worldview, I think it's something like this: Physical matter is the ultimate truth of things. It's the ultimate basis for everything else. It is the source of all that arises. It is various chemical combinations that lead to physical matter forming into life, and it is life formed from physical matter that gives rise to consciousness.

When we see in this way that the physical reality is the ultimate reality, then we feel that we have only existed since we've come into this world, that the world is the first thing, and when we die, we go out of the world and it continues. This is only one way of looking. It is, I think, the common Western materialistic way, but it is only one way of looking.

Other Indian schools of philosophy view consciousness as the ultimate reality, the primary stuff of the universe. From that point of view, they see world systems as one of the arisings in consciousness, but with consciousness being more fundamental than matter.

And so appearances arise just like dream images within consciousness.

The Buddha himself took a kind of middle way between these two worldviews. In his teachings, he said that consciousness and matter depended on one another. He compared them to two stalks of twigs that were leaning up against each other. He said, if you take away one, the other will fall over also. That is, if you take away matter, consciousness will fall apart. But if you take away consciousness, matter will fall away.

In our Western materialist view, we tend to forget that to some extent this appearance of the world depends on consciousness. When we take matter as the fundamental reality, we forget that link. So what if we bring that back in a little bit?

A big part of the insight and investigation that comes in practice is the understanding of this transitory nature of our experience. One of the ways that it often first starts to open up to people is in the investigation of form through the direct experience of the body.

When I came into meditation, I thought of the body as something solid. My idea of it was shaped by the anatomy books I'd read. I sort of knew where the organs were and where the bones were, and I really thought that's what the body was as ultimate reality. In meditation, I was encouraged to take a direct look

at the experience of the body from within, and what I found there was not solid, but rather everywhere I turned my attention, I encountered change.

The sensations weren't solid when I looked at them closely, but they were more characterized by pulsation, vibration, movement—on, off, weaker, stronger, more painful, less painful. Everywhere I would put my attention, I was only getting a changing sensation. That started to loosen up the idea of solidity that I had had about the body.

We also, of course, are encouraged to explore the other senses. So sounds happen so fast that that's usually an easy area to see this insubstantial nature. Thoughts, as Joseph was describing this morning, just pop up out of nowhere, gone in a few moments. Where was it? When we look at it closely, there's very little weight in a thought.

Emotions can be very strong and compelling, yet if you're asked to meditate directly on them, turn your attention directly to them and be mindful of them, sometimes they just evaporate, just like a cloud when the sunlight shines on it. Tastes and smells also quite light.

But for me, the sense store that was most impenetrable was the sense of sight. I would look out at a setting like this—everything looked unchanging. It looked really solid. So the reflection that I went through was to just inquire a little bit how this sight has gotten created in this consciousness.

And of course, it's just simple kind of seventh grade science. We know that for a sight to appear, there has to be light reflected off the object, traveling to the eye, millions of photons every second, impinging on the retina, stimulating a signal that travels through the optic nerve up to the brain, stimulates a certain region, and then through some really magical process, sight appears.

That sight that we are seeing now is dependent on the millions of photons impacting the retina every second. If those photons stopped coming, the sight would cease, would fall away. So we recognize when we reflect in that way that this sight that seems so solid is actually being regenerated many times a second by the electrical activity of our nervous system and the translation of the brain into consciousness. Very mysterious process, this last step, but something like that seems to be going on. So this sense, too, is insubstantial.

Something else that I used to reflect on and play with: If I asked you the color of this book, I don't think it's a real secret. Most people would say this book is blue. But I started to ask myself, where is blue? Because as you also know from science, this appears blue because the blue is getting bounced back to your eyes. And the book is actually absorbing all the other colors, but the blue is being reflected. So really, when you think about it, if you think about the book itself, it's everything but blue, because the blue is what's coming back at you. So where is blue? It's not really in the book, is it? It's just in consciousness.

So this became really interesting for me because I started to realize that what I had taken to be the real world and the ultimate reality wasn't in the way that I was used to thinking about it. Again, I'm sure you

all have reflected on this also, but we tend to forget that it's like this. What we see is just a representation of the world that comes in through our senses and then gets created by some interplay between our nervous system and our brains to come out as consciousness. We're not in touch with what's independent of our senses and nervous systems. It's only a representation of the world filtered through our own system.

But we tend to forget that, and we tend to give it a solidity and an ultimate reality, when in fact it's only held, as you might say, a bubble in consciousness. Even the sense of ground that we so take for granted is

Even the sense of ground that we so take for granted—if you think about that—is only the sensation of hardness underneath our feet or our cushion. But that sense of hardness is also held in consciousness. So although this room has a ground, which is the earth or the floor, consciousness doesn't have a ground. In consciousness, there's nothing underneath that sense of hardness. There's just space.

When we start to see the world in this way, there's some language that can help remind us. And I like to play with the idea, instead of calling things objects of the world, rather to call them appearances. We live in a world of appearances, but we can't actually know what the reality of those objects are independent of our own senses. So we live in a world of appearances, and that's why the Tibetans have this really lovely phrase. They call this a magical display. And this is exactly the same thing that the Buddha is pointing to in calling consciousness a magic show.

How is this created? I don't know. It has its own laws. The physical laws, the chemical laws, the biological laws all still apply. And yet we don't quite know what they apply to. So we have this magical display of appearances that is sometimes compared to a dream.

And really, this is an interesting thing to reflect on, too. Is there any real difference between a moment of experience in a dream and a moment of experience in waking life? The Tibetans have explored this really thoroughly through dream yoga. And they say in meditating, sometimes they get confused. They're in a dream and they don't know if they're in a dream or in waking life. So they say there's a way to find out, the way to check. You pick up a book, you open it to a page, and you read a passage. You close the book up, you put it down, you wait a moment, you pick it up again, you turn to the same page, and you read the same passage. If it reads the same, it's real life. If it reads differently, it's a dream. Just in case you need to know. But that's how close together these experiences are. Accomplished meditators cannot tell the difference sometimes.

So one of my Tibetan teachers put it this way. He said it all has "rangdröl"—and that means no substantial or solid existence. It's all just flickers of our nervous system creating a representation of something. That's why it's also compared, as the Buddha did, to a mirage or a bubble.

The sense of emptiness which lacks the center of I is the way the Buddha usually used the term emptiness in his teachings—the lack of central self. But this insubstantial nature that we're talking about now more

has to do with the emptiness of phenomena. Sometimes called emptiness, another word for it is transparency or insubstantiality or openness.

That this is a potent insight is pointed to from the Heart Sutra. If you know the Heart Sutra, near the start of it is this lovely little sentence: "While practicing deeply the paramita of wisdom"—that means the quality or development of wisdom—"the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress." So this perception is pointed to in one of the most ancient texts as being the direct avenue to liberation.

So one way that we can understand emptiness is by seeing this insubstantial, transitory quality of phenomena. Why is that so helpful? Because when we understand how fragile and how insubstantial it is, we're less likely to cling. When we understand it completely, we don't cling anymore. But because we forget and we think it's solid again, we cling again. And the other aspect is this absence of self within the whole show.

This is a key misunderstanding. And a simple way to think of it is the way we identify with the body as either being I or mine. This again is from the Buddha. He's talking to one of his chief disciples, Sariputta: "It's hard to find people who can understand this teaching. Those who understand it are hard to find." It's kind of plaintive, isn't it? Those of you who are professors and teachers probably know this feeling.

And Sariputta, who's a great student, 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."

So the Buddha continues, "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."

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.

This came clear to me at one point in my practice. I was a monk in Thailand, and as a monk, I had the privilege of seeing autopsies. I know some of you are physicians and have had this opportunity many times. I was thirty-two years old and had never been next to a dead body before. I walked into the autopsy theater and immediately stood next to the body of a young woman who had been recently fished out of a canal. She became the first subject for the autopsy that took place.

So I took a seat in the theater and watched. Because you are all scientists, I'll share the unvarnished version of this. The first thing the coroner did was make an incision from one ear over the top of the skull and through the scalp to the other ear. Having made that incision, he pulled down the two pieces of skin that were exposed and in doing so peeled the skin away from the face. Never having seen a dead body before, this was shocking. It was powerful.

Then he took a saw—and in Thailand it was a hand saw—and sawed off the top part of the skull in order

to remove it and expose the brain. He went through and opened up the chest cavity and took out the internal organs and weighed them. I then sat through two other autopsies that were performed in a similar way.

Then I walked outside, going back to the monastery. The hospital was near a big parade ground, the central parade ground in Bangkok, where I had to catch my bus. So I walked out—and I was very altered. But I walked out into this sunny day, and I was just watching the people walk across the parade ground. There were mothers with their children. There were couples holding hands. There were old women coming from the market with their shopping carts, all walking by in the sunshine.

I was there in a very present way. And what I said to myself was—all I could see were walking corpses. Everyone looked like the same thing I had just seen on the autopsy table, but they were animated. And then I later thought to myself, what do I mean by a walking corpse? The way I was seeing it was there was just a body, but this body carried a brightness that shined out through the eyes. And that brightness was very alive, was very vital, animating the body.

But that brightness was completely of the present moment. It didn't have any past and it didn't have any future. It was only here now. But because of this peculiar capacity of memory, our thought processes can construct an imaginary past and project it forward into an imaginary future and lose track of this completely present moment experience that is all that we are.

When I saw in that way, I also saw how insubstantial everybody's life was, including my own. All I had was this moment and this very transitory body. So although it sounds like this opening to emptiness might be a cold or clinical vision, what I found for me is that it was very moving. Because I saw that we're all in this same predicament. We're looking for some kind of security. We're craving something to rely on in this world that is only a flickering image constructed by our nervous systems, in a momentary existence where we don't know what's going to happen in the next moment.

And the only way to find peace or freedom in this situation is to let go, is not to cling. And it's so hard to learn to do. And this is our common universal human condition.

In the Buddhist tradition, Kuan Yin is said to be the bodhisattva of compassion. It's said that she hears all the cries of the world, the cries of sorrow and the cries of joy, and is always available for us to call on for her support and her understanding. But you know, Kuan Yin is not a beginning meditator. She's a bodhisattva. So her compassion is very strong, but her wisdom is also very strong. She understands that there is suffering but there is no one who suffers. And so in her understanding and her compassion, she balances this open heart and this imperturbable composure.

I'll just close with this line that is sometimes attributed to her: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

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