Guided Meditation on the Five Aggregates

Myoshin Kelley · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 37:28

This morning we explore the five aggregates through guided meditation.

These five aggregates are aspects of experience that continually arise and pass away. When we cling to any of these aggregates as being self, this is suffering, because all of these aggregates are conditioned, subject to change, and not amenable to our will.

Acknowledging that all of the five aggregates arise together: in the arising of material form, there is contact which creates pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. We need perception to identify the experience, consciousness to know the experience, and intention to act.

First, let us look at material form—this body that we so often relate to as being ours. How do we experience this body? What do we know for ourselves about this body? Laying aside the conceptual level of the body and what we think we know, we look into direct experience.

We come to know the elements. The earth element: hardness, softness. The fire element: there might be sensations where the skin meets the air—coolness or warmth. In areas of pressure, there might be a lot of heat. The air element: movement, vibration, expansion, contraction, gurgling in the stomach, wind. The water element: moisture in the mouth and the eyes, inferred by the sensation of heaviness, which is matter being held together.

In just one breath, there may be awareness of softness as earth element, coolness as fire, vibrations as air. All of these elements arise and disappear. Are you the vibrations? Are you the softness? Are you the heaviness? Can you control this body, these elements? Or are they simply unfolding according to natural laws, conditioned?

With awareness of the material form, we can see: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

Looking at the second aggregate, vedana, the feeling tone—the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality present in any aspect of experience, be it body sensation, sound, mental image, thought, or emotion. It is the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality that arises with immediate impact or contact, not once we have analyzed the appearance.

Touch points may feel soft, cushiony, and be experienced as pleasant. Or there may be hardness, throbbing—unpleasant. Seeing it in its arising, is there a reaction to this awareness? A joy, a delight, when we like it, when it is pleasant? Or is the reaction to push it away? Or not to notice?

What is it like when the pleasant is seen as simply pleasant, not defining self by it? Unpleasant as just that? If pleasant experience is there and it changes, are we left craving, wanting it back?

Notice how in any experience, through any of the sense doors, one of these qualities is present. This quality is a conditioned and transient process, conditioned through the consequences of past actions. The reaction to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral can be deeply conditioned. But when we learn to bring wise attention, we are no longer manipulated by these experiences. They are seen as: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

The third aggregate is perception, that which labels or organizes, which can distinguish breath from sound, from touch, from smells, sights, thoughts, or mind states.

Sound arises, and through this organizing capacity, we can recognize it as the ocean's voice—different from a mechanical noise or a bodily sound.

There can be different levels of perception. On one level, perceiving the ocean's voice; on another level, the perception can simply be of hearing, or of vibration.

Now bring the attention to the whole body. Hold the perception of the whole body and see what happens. Does the perception remain the same? Or are there experiences that jump out? Perception changing as the experiences change.

How things are perceived can be very powerful. Perhaps there's an area in the body that's in pain. Take a moment to focus on it, focusing on it as pain. And then let go of the naming of pain and instead simply know the qualities that are present—tightness, heat, vibrations, stabbing. Perception recognizes these qualities. Is there a difference to perceive it as pain or as the qualities?

Through our practice, there's a refining of perception.

In a moment of perception, is there the sense that *I* am perceiving? Or is this just what happens when sense door contact occurs? This data continually being received, arising and passing, changing, not amenable to our will. With wise attention, seeing: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

Looking now at the aggregate of volitional formations—that conditioning agent in the mind that produces karma.

For a moment, turn the attention to the breath. There was an intention to do so. Any little shifts in the body have intention before movement. Intention can be known through thought, or as the urge or impulse, the gathering of energy.

We have the intention to be mindful. It has an effect. There may be a period of getting lost in thought, and then the intention arises again.

Mind states are also conditioning agents. Notice if any hindrances are present—desire, aversion,

sleepiness, restlessness, or doubt. Do these states affect the thoughts? The kinds of thoughts? Is there an effect in the body?

Can you control these volitional formations? Can you choose to be mindful moment after moment? Can you choose to have a mind filled with loving-kindness? Or does it suddenly shift, change?

Are these formations who you really are? Are you the anger? Are you the desire? Are you the sleepiness? Or are these experiences arising out of certain conditions, being known, and changing?

With wise attention we see: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

Looking now at the aggregate of consciousness—the knowing quality.

A sound is made, it hits the ear door, and hearing consciousness arises. As the sound disappears, is the hearing consciousness still there?

When we relax, things are known of their own accord when the mind is undistracted. Sitting here, so many experiences being known—hearing, body sensations, sights, images, thoughts, mind states. It's knowing: spontaneous, impermanent, changing. Not amenable to our will.

Wisely seeing: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

From the Buddha: "What do you think—are material form, feelings, perceptions, formations, and consciousness permanent or impermanent?"

Impermanent, Venerable Sir.

Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?

Suffering, Venerable Sir.

Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: This is mine, this I am, this is myself?

No, Venerable Sir.

Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of material form, feelings, perceptions, formations, or consciousness—whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.

Ehipassiko—this means "come and see." The Dhamma is calling everyone to come and see, to meditate upon this truth directly.

There are just a few minutes remaining this morning if there are any questions.

Thank you for listening.

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