# At Fives and Sixes: The Five Aggregates and Six Sense Fields

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:04:24

About the five aggregates and the six sense fields.

This talk comes out of something that I'm writing. I'm writing about the aggregates and the sense fields in terms of satipaṭṭhāna, in the fourth satipaṭṭhāna—dhamma or dhammas. The Buddha presents different schemas and then he presents a practice along with each one. So I was looking at the five aggregates and the six senses, had started writing about them and trying to work out what's the difference, and then fell over in a heap and thought, I've got to get back to basics and research them again. And so I have, and I've produced a talk about them, hoping that from this will emerge the distinction between them and why there's two and why not just one.

So let's begin.

When the Buddha talks about the human condition, he presents two important schemas. One of these is the five aggregates, and the other is the six sense fields. Tonight we're going to briefly explore both of them. We'll start with the five aggregates.

These, of course, are very famous. First of all, the thing about the aggregates is that they are always associated with clinging. The Buddha presents them actually in his first discourse. The six sense fields turn up in his third discourse, but the aggregates turn up in the very first one. He presents them as part of the truth on dukkha, and he presents them as the pañca upādāna khandhā. *Pañca* is five, *khandhā* is what we translate as aggregate, and *upādāna* is clinging. This comes as a compound, and the two basic elements in the compound are clinging and aggregates. So the question is, what's the relationship between the two of them?

Let's start with clinging, or in Pali, *upādāna*. Pali is the closest that we have to the language the Buddha taught in, so that's why it's important to go back and try to figure out what he's actually talking about.

We have this word *upādāna*, and it's constructed out of three elements: *upa* plus *ā* plus the root *dā*. It's all based on the root, and the root *dā* means give. Of course, you're familiar with this word—it's already been used: *dāna*, giving or gift. So *upādāna*, that last bit, is gift, giving. Then in front of that you have the prefix *ā* , long *ā*, and this indicates to take, to bring towards. If you give a gift, the gift is going away from you, in a direction away. But put in *ā*, and suddenly the direction is reversed—it's coming toward you. And *upa* indicates nearness or close touch. So *upādāna* is taking or bringing to oneself—appropriation, to

appropriate something. *Upādāna* is taking as one's own.

Let's reapply this to the khandhās. Here is the list of the five khandhās. If you're familiar with basic Buddhist teaching you already know the list: body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness.

The first one is body. Does it make sense to you to think or to say, "This is my body"? Do you ever think in terms of "my body"? Would you ever in conversation say, "Well, my body..."? And is this meaningful to you? Well, of course it is. This is often the way we talk about body. We talk about it as "my." In other words, we have body and we take it as one's own. We take it as mine. And that action is *upādāna*—to take something as mine.

Does that make sense?

So it's usually translated in English as clinging or attachment, but this is essentially what it is. Appropriation is to take something as belonging to me. This is upadana.

So we have upadana, and then we have the word khanda. Khanda has different meanings depending on context. Khanda indicates a mass of something, suggesting something very large. For example, a big wall is a khanda. The bulk of an elephant is a khanda.

Khanda also suggests a great collection of something. Imagine a pile of sand on the beach. That pile of sand is a khanda. It's one big thing, a pile of sand, and it consists of many smaller units, each individual grain of sand. The mass of all those grains of sand results in a khanda, a pile of sand. And you notice with this example, what connects the parts to make the whole is very loose. They're very loosely connected. In other words, a pile of sand is easily scattered.

When the Buddha uses the term khanda to talk about identity, which he does, already with the language he's suggesting that what holds an identity together is not as tight as what we might think.

So khanda is a mass of something. It also suggests a big collection of something. And if we take it as a collection, which here I think we're meant to, khanda can indicate a category of something. For example, with our pile of sand, everything here that can be categorized as sand is collected into the khanda of beach. Beach is a khanda which covers the category of sand collected here.

When the Buddha talks about body as a khanda, what he's talking about is the whole mass of experiences that can be categorized as body—in other words, as physical. So the first khanda, body, means the whole mass of all those experiences which can be categorized as being physical. And so on with the others. We'll get to the others.

So the pancha khanda, the five khandas. This is a list, and of course anybody familiar with the Buddha's teaching knows that he loves a good list. This list consists of body, feeling, perception, choices, awareness. These are five categories, khanda, that each contains a great mass, khanda, of individual experiences. You notice that the whole thing is about experience. And the Buddha's teaching is always about experience.

So why are these categories so important? They're important because these are the categories of experience that we appropriate—upadana—we appropriate them as "this is mine." And why is this important? Because appropriation, possession, is an essential aspect of self. In Sanskrit, atma; in Pali, attan.

If you think about self, what do we mean by self? In particular, what does the Buddha mean by self?

First of all, self is the one who acts, the one who does things—like comes along to a Melbourne Insight meditation meeting. The one who is in charge of his or her own actions. The actions she possesses, appropriates.

Which brings us to the second aspect of self. Self is the one who possesses a body and a mind, who possesses his or her actions and who therefore is responsible for his or her actions. You notice: his actions, her actions—possessed. Self is the person to whom it makes sense to refer to as "my body," "my mind," "my actions."

Now, you wouldn't refer in that way to someone else.

Self is the one to whom it makes sense to refer as "my actions, my thoughts, my experience," and so on.

This is why the khandhas are important—this particular list—because these are the categories of experience that we reach out and appropriate, taking them as "this is mine, I am this, this is me."

So the list of the five aggregates is the list of those aspects of our experience that the Buddha believes we appropriate, we cling to, in order to construct a sense of self.

First, body—physical experience. The body gives our identity a sense of solidity. There's a physical form located in space. Physical experience becomes my body, my seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. And this is who I am: I am the one who is seeing, I am the one who is speaking, and so on.

Then we have feeling—vedanā in Pali. This is the affective aspect of experience, that which moves me or stimulates a response. There are three categories of feeling: pleasant, painful, and neither. If the feeling is pleasant, I am moved to hold on and become intimate with whatever gives that pleasant feeling. If the feeling is painful, I am moved to reject and distance myself from whatever gives painful feeling. And whatever gives neither pleasant nor painful feeling, I am moved to ignore because it's not worth noticing—or I am moved to be doubtful and confused about what to do about it. So feeling tells me how I am, the distinctive pattern of feelings and responses that govern my emotional life. And again, *my* emotional life.

Perception is the recognition or interpretation of any experience—what gives familiarity and meaning to an experience. So perception gives me what I am experiencing, the world within which I find myself, which becomes *my* world, the world within which I operate. Notice how perception and feeling act together: feeling provides the affective or emotional aspect of response, and perception provides what I

am responding to.

Then we have choices—saṅkhāra. These are all choices and decisions to act. They too are appropriated to give me the sense that these are my decisions and I am the one making them.

Finally, we have awareness—vijñāna in Pali. This is the most intimate of all. When we appropriate awareness, this gives me the sense that I am the one who is aware of all this. All of these experiences are part of *my* awareness.

That's the list of the five. Notice—and we'll explore this later—that of these five aggregates, one is physical and the rest are mental.

So now we can answer the question we asked before: what's the relationship between the upādāna and the khandha, between the appropriation and the aggregate? The khandhas, the aggregates, are what we cling to in order to construct a self living within his or her world. Taken together as self, the five aggregates represent our fundamental point of reference.

Self is the place from which we experience the world—going out in that direction. And it's also the place to which the world refers. We all have a sense, for example, that this meeting is happening to me. The "me" to which experiences happen is self. We have a deep sense that this is *my* life. Self is the owner of this life. Self is the reference

against which everything in our lives is measured. And the Buddha says we use the five aggregates to construct that reference.

Any questions? Yes, Patrick. Angela.

"So does that also mean that we can use the five aggregates to deconstruct ourself?"

And that is very much the practice of not-self—looking at the construction project and, in being aware of it, not getting caught up in it, and therefore deconstructing the self.

"And in that, where do the aggregates reside?"

The aggregates are always the aggregates, but they cease to be the upadana aggregates.

"Okay, yes, I think that's what I was getting a little bit confused about."

When the Buddha talks about the four truths in his first discourse, he says, in brief, the pancha upadana khandha are dukkha. Now, the Buddha has a reputation for being an old pessimist because he thinks everything's dukkha. But you notice that he doesn't say the five aggregates are dukkha. He says the five upadana aggregates are dukkha. When we appropriate them, they dukkha. But when we don't appropriate them, they're just what's happening.

But in order to not appropriate them, given that it's our deeply ingrained habit to appropriate, we've got to have the samadhi and the sati—the concentration and the mindfulness—to be able to see ourselves constructing ourselves in real time. And then we can say, "Oh, I'm not going to do this. Too much bother, apart from anything else." And so self is something to be deconstructed.

Thank you. Any other questions? Wendy?

"Just a question. You said that only the body is physical and the other four are mental or conceptual. And I'm just wondering whether feelings might also be bodily in some sense."

They're certainly bodily in that there are feelings that move the body. There are feelings that move what we would normally call mind, or let's say the psychological realm. But feeling itself is psychological in this system.

"Okay."

They move the body. The categories are concepts. And whenever you look at the Buddha's teaching, he's using concepts. Now the thing about concepts—one thing that makes them very useful is that they have very clear borders. But experience itself is kind of messy. So it's always a problem to hold on too tightly to a concept and try to force the experience to fit the concept. There's a certain creativity in the way you apply the concept. As a meditator, what's most important is the experience and using the concepts to clarify the experience. If you want to be an academic, I'm sure there's a PhD in there about whether vedana is really bodily. But for a practitioner, you don't waste your time.

"Thank you. I'd rather be a practitioner."

Okay, shall we move on? Let's get to dukkha. Because as we said, the five khandhas are closely associated with dukkha. In the first discourse, Turning the Dharma Wheel, the Buddha says, in summary, the five aggregates associated with clinging are dukkha. So they're fundamentally important because the Buddha's whole project is how we can live without dukkha. In a couple of discourses, this very brief teaching pops up where he says, "Previously and now, what I teach is dukkha and the cessation of dukkha." That's what he's focused on.

So if he's really focused on dukkha, why is he so interested in self? And why does he reject the teaching of self? It's because for him, self and possession go together, and possession causes dukkha. If we want our dukkha to cease—dukkha is, of course, pain, suffering, distress, dis-ease, the whole range of the unpleasant—if we want our dukkha to cease, the Buddha says, well, stop taking as ours what is not ours. Stop appropriating, stop clinging.

So the aggregates are important because this is what we appropriate as mine. And this is what we use to construct an identity, which we take—again, taking—to be fundamentally real. Now the problem is not that we construct an identity. The Buddha constructed an identity. He knew precisely who he was, but he

recognized this identity as essentially a convenience, as a concept or a network of concepts that helped him get through the day and function well.

He did not take this self as the fundamental reality and then try to bend the world to accommodate it. Rather, he adapted his self to be able to work within the world. Does that make sense?

So now we come to the practice of the five aggregates. How do we practice with these aggregates? In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha says: "Here a practitioner understands—such is body, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is feeling, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such is perception, such its arising, such its disappearance. Such are choices, such their arising, such their disappearance. Such is awareness, such its arising, such its disappearance."

So the practice is actually very, very simple, and it comes in two parts. Number one: clarify the experience. "Such is body." This word "such"—*iti* in Pali. So this physical experience, what is it? What is its real nature? Really paying attention.

Those of you who practice mindfulness meditation will recognize this as what is sometimes called bare attention, or what in the Mahasi lineage is called noting—to be directly aware of precisely this. Such is this body's sensation. Such is this thought. Such is this feeling, and so on. Be clear about what's going on, and then perceive its impermanence, its change: such its arising, such its disappearance.

The perception of impermanence is crucial here. Now, we've talked about this before, so let's just briefly go over this. Why is change so important for the Buddha?

The word that he uses is *anicca*, which can be broken up into *a* and *nicca*. *A* is the negative prefix—not. And *nicca* means permanent, but also stable, constant. In everyday usage, *nicca* refers to what can be relied upon. For example, in everyday Pali, you have the expression *nitya dāna*, a perpetual gift—something that can be relied upon to last for a very long time. You also have *nitya bhatta,* a perpetual food supply—a food supply which is continuous and therefore reliable.

So *anicca*, not-*nicca*, means unstable, inconstant, discontinuous, and therefore ultimately unreliable. Not to be depended upon, not to be trusted. This is where you see the link between *anicca* and *dukkha*, between change and pain. When we rely on something unreliable, or someone unreliable, sooner or later we are disappointed. It's inevitable.

What self does is provide us with a sense of permanence and the security that such a sense offers. Remember that self gives us our fundamental reference point: this is happening to *me*. And self—because notice, of the five aggregates, four of them are mental—self is heavily conceptual. So self lets us project this reference point to the past: this happened to me a long time ago. And it lets us project this reference point to the future: this will happen to me.

Then we get locked into the sameness that permanence presents. "I didn't like this before, therefore I will

never like it." "We did things this way before, therefore we should always do things this way." And any threat to this sameness becomes a threat to self, to me and mine. Does that make sense? This is how self and permanence go together.

So the practice of the five aggregates is all about undermining self by undermining possession.

Because if you don't have possession, if we're not appropriating, we can't have a self. And the teaching does this by undermining the assumption of permanence. So if we're practicing for insight, we train ourselves to see the change within experience. And once we really perceive change, at some point we realize that it's futile to project self into the experience. If this desire is me and it's mine, what happens to me when it changes? Is there a new me?

Normally we just assume an unchanging self back there to whom these changes occur. But the Buddha is saying, just look for this unchanging self back there. And he offers five categories of experience where we might go looking. Just look for this unchanging self back there—that one to whom this is happening. Can you find it? He's betting that anything we actually find turns out to be impermanent.

But not only do things change—when we start to really become intimate with this fact, we realize that experiences change according to the natural laws of what the Buddha calls dependent origination, or paticca samuppada. If things change according to universal natural laws, then they do not change because I decide they should. So where is self here?

The practice of investigating the five aggregates revolves around learning to deeply perceive the impermanence and unreliability of whatever I appropriate to construct "I" and "mine." So that's our potted summary of the five aggregates. Any questions about them before we move on? Otherwise, quickly you would have forgotten that there ever were five aggregates. You'd be asking questions like, "Didn't you mention something like aggregate? How many of them were there?" So now, while it's fresh in the mind, any questions?

A student raised an interesting point: "I'm often aware that the experience I'm having is not the same that my partner or somebody else in the room is having. There's a deep sense of not being able to trust the perceptions that I have about myself or even an event. To some extent, I can rely on the body to say, okay, we both heard this noise or we both feel this happened. But in terms of how it's interpreted, it's so deeply personal, depending on our own sense of self and history and experiences."

This does show how self can be undermined by just social relationships, which reveals why we choose the friends that we choose. Back in the day when John Howard ruled Australia, I was having a political discussion with some friends and we realized we don't know anybody who actually voted for John Howard. I had one person in mind whom I was too ashamed to mention—I strongly suspect my mother voted for him. But apart from her, I don't think there was anybody in my social circle who would have voted for John Howard. I strongly suspect there's no one in my social circle who votes for Scotty either.

If I was friendly with a keen Scotty fan, because the perceptions are so different, there would be a clash. And the clash would come because I would feel under threat from this person's perception. This is why we swim in the social circles that we swim in. We prefer to mix with people who do not challenge unduly our sense of self. There'll be some challenge—it's inevitable—but not too much.

The student observed, "This is very much the social self, because it just reinforces what we want to believe or think."

Yes, it reinforces the world that we're convinced we live in, along with the values we hold. It's not threatening to be with somebody that you more or less ninety percent agree with.

I got a lesson in this decades ago. I spent five years practicing Zen. I was a very early member of what was then the Sydney Zen Group and later became the Sydney Zen Centre. We brought out Robert Aitken Roshi, the first Zen teacher to come to Australia. I was a student of his. I went off to Hawaii, to his center, and spent two years there.

But I had come to Zen via Tel Aviv, and when I left Hawaii, I went to Southeast Asia and India and back to Tel Aviv. So I came back to Australia years later as part of the Mahasi lineage. And I lost friends. They just could not wrap their heads around it. I lost one lot of friends, gained another lot, but realized if I walk out of here, I'll lose them. And that's within a group of people practicing the same sort of faith or religion or practice.

The student remarked, "All of them are Buddhists."

Exactly. That's the nature of self. Talk about fixed self.

I sometimes struggle with this, particularly in terms of ethics. It sometimes crosses my mind that if I choose to steal the family's chocolate biscuits, I have permission to say, "Not me, not mine, I'm not making this choice."

You could say that, but I don't know whether it would succeed.

Actually, this reminds me of a book I read years ago. I think it was called *On Killing*. It was written by a retired colonel from the US Army who was interested in, among other things, how the army trains its recruits to kill. People have researched this, mostly in the US.

For example, they did calculations on eighteenth-century battles. You have a group of men lined up in bright, distinctive uniforms. Just over there, you've got another group of men lined up in bright, distinctive uniforms. They aim muskets at each other and blast away. This is a typical eighteenth, early nineteenth-century battle. Somebody went to the records, reconstructing what happened in these battles, and concluded that so few people were shot that it cannot be explained by how inaccurate the muskets were. A lot of the soldiers must have been shooting high. They must have been.

In the US Civil War, when people would collect guns after a battle—the rifles, still muzzle-loaders—they would often find rifles with several bullets loaded. In other words, someone had shoved a bullet in, aimed, pretended to fire, shoved another one in, aimed, pretended to fire, so they looked as if they were doing their job, but they weren't. It's the same phenomenon. There weren't enough casualties because people could not bring themselves—and we're talking masses of people, trained soldiers—if they're looking at someone, they couldn't bring themselves to do it. They just couldn't, even if they ended up dead as a result.

So the ethical choices that we make are deeply conditioned. Some of us can do certain things, but a lot of us can't. And some people who do end up psychologically broken because they've done it. The conditioning goes very deep, including ethically. We're not just free agents.

Shall we continue? Let's move on to the six senses, or the six sense fields.

This is the second schema that's really important for the Buddha. These are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and minding. What they do is not create the self—rather, they provide the world within which we live.

This comes out in a number of discourses. Take one of them, the Sabba Sutta, "Everything," where the Buddha tells his students that he will teach them "everything." Now, we can imagine them settling in for a long talk, but this discourse is actually very brief. The Buddha says: "What is everything? Eye sensitivity and forms, ear sensitivity and sounds, nose sensitivity and smells, tongue sensitivity and tastes, body sensitivity and tangibles, mind sensitivity and phenomena. Whoever would say, 'I reject this everything and declare another,' if questioned on the foundation of his words, he could not explain and would become distressed. Why? Because it is beyond range."

This is really important. It brings out a basic principle of the Buddha's teaching. What he's interested in is the nature of human experience, which means he's interested in what happens in the six sense fields. He's not interested in anything else. This is why he has no time for a doctrine of, for example, a creator god—not because he says there isn't one, but because he says if there is one, then by definition it's beyond the range of the six senses. He's just not interested. He's just not going to go there. Whenever the Buddha talks about the world, he does so in terms of the six senses.

How do they work? In this passage, you get a pattern repeated again and again. We'll just go through the first sensitivity, eye sensitivity: "Depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling."

This is a basic teaching of dependent arising. You have eye sensitivity, which is sensitivity to light—one part of the body that is sensitive to light. You have visual forms. Depending on these two, when you also get visual awareness, when those three come together, you have what is usually translated as "contact"—literally *phassa* in Pali.

Phassa, or contact, indicates the immediacy of experience. And phassa—it's normally translated as

"contact," but it actually literally means "touched" or "touch." So the Buddha is saying we are touched by what streams through our senses. And this touch, which is happening here and now, is the immediacy of experience where a sensitivity, a corresponding object, and awareness come together.

When this happens—when we are touched, and we are touched through all six senses all of the time—contact conditions feeling. In other words, we feel this touch. And this brings us to the question of sentience, which is a key concept in the Buddha's ethics.

We are sentient beings. I'm sure you've heard that expression in Buddhist ethics. To be sentient is to be aware and to feel. Living beings are sentient; non-living things are not. For example, we might have an air conditioning system programmed to maintain a steady temperature of, let's say, twenty-five degrees by means of a thermostat. But we don't say the thermostat feels hot or feels cold. On the other hand, we feel hot or cold. This capacity to feel is sentience, and we are sentient bodies.

Now this has important implications for the Buddha's approach to ethics, because his ethical concern does not stop at our species but extends to all sentient beings. And a sentient being is a being who feels pain, loves life, and fears death.

Notice that the first characteristic of a sentient being is that of feeling pain. For the Buddha, sentience entails pain. If we have sentience, we have pain. We could go so far as to say that the difference between a robot and a living being is not their comparative intelligence, but whether or not they feel pain. If an entity feels pain, then that entity is sentient.

So we are sentient. We are aware and we feel, and that means we are exposed to pain. This becomes obvious in our meditation practice. One reason why it's so easy to postpone meditation practice is because when we put a pause on our habitual obsessions and dullness, when we allow ourselves to be aware of whatever we are experiencing in the present, often we recognize the pervasive restlessness, an inability for body and mind to settle and absorb itself fully into what's going on. The sense fields open us to our sentience and the consequences of that sentience. We are touched by the world; we are moved by that touch.

So what happens next? In another discourse, the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta—"the sweet essence," or as usually translated, "the honey ball"—a senior disciple is expanding on what the Buddha had said, and he says: what we feel, we perceive; what we perceive, we think about; what we think about, we proliferate.

We've already talked about how closely connected feeling and perception are. Feeling is affective and gives us the world that moves us. Perception is cognitive and gives us a world we can recognize and understand. But you notice feeling comes first. We respond spontaneously through the heart and then make sense out of that movement. Our rationality is built on the foundation of feeling, and rationality then runs away into proliferation. This is essentially thinking in hyperdrive, where what we do is create a conceptual world that is far removed from what we have directly experienced.

Does that make sense? Any questions thus far? Sorry this is going on so long, but what to do?

So then we have the practice of the sense fields in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: "He, a practitioner, understands eye sensitivity, he understands forms, and he understands the bond that arises dependent on both. He understands how an unarisen bond arises, how an arisen bond is abandoned, and how an abandoned bond does not arise in the future. He understands ear sensitivity, nose sensitivity, tongue sensitivity, body sensitivity. He understands mind sensitivity. He understands phenomena. And he understands the bond that arises dependent on both," and so on.

So the practice of the senses revolves around the bond or the fetter—fetter is the normal translation—that arises in the relationship between sense sensitivity and sense object. This practice is all about the relationship between the subjective and the objective. The subjective is the sense sensitivity. The objective is the sense object. And this relationship, under normal circumstances, gives rise to what the Buddha calls saṃyojana, which is classically translated as "fetter."

And here I translate it as bond because I don't like the word "fetter" — I never actually use that word in ordinary speech.

Anyway, let's look at this word, *saṃyojana*. It's a compound consisting of *yojana* with the prefix *saṃ* in front of it. A *yojana* is a yoke — it's cognate with our English word "yoke," and also with "yoga." A *yojana* is what holds two oxen together. In the Buddha's time, most transport was by oxen cart. You would have one or two oxen pulling a cart, and most goods traveling by land moved in this way. If you've got two oxen side by side, they're joined by a yoke, by a *yojana*. It holds the two oxen together. The prefix *saṃ* indicates "together." So a *saṃyojana* yokes us, ties us, binds us, fetters us.

This binding is affective in its nature. It's a product of feeling, of our heart's response to what's happening. And this response is described as *chanda-rāga*. *Chanda* is impulse, desire, excitement, agitation. *Rāga* is literally "color" — the coloring of the heart when we're caught up in something. Traditionally it's translated as "lust," which I think is a terrible translation. It's closer to obsession. So the bond is impulse and obsession working together, a spinning off of our desires, fears, hatreds, prejudices, and so on. We find ourselves building worlds where our heart's reactions, aided by our delusions, cause us to be lost in *dukkha* — in a world of our own creation that bears little resemblance to the world presented by our senses.

Does that make sense? I realize it's heavy going tonight, but this is what happens when you're a crash test dummy. Sorry.

A question came: "That just seems crazy. Why do we do this?"

That's a very good question. I can't fully answer it. Basically, the two drives — *taṇhā* and *avijjā*, drivenness and delusion — brought together: bang. This is universal. It's not just us. Don't blame yourself. This is the way nature works.

"Okay, that's very reassuring."

Another question: "Does it always start with — like after the sense contact — is feeling always the next thing?"

The connection is so intimate it's not even the next thing. They arise together.

"So what if you're a well-deconstructed self and you're sitting in meditation and you perceive something in mind? Hasn't that come first? You've noticed it before you've noticed the feeling, but you've already moved."

This is where *vedanā* goes so deep and is so ubiquitous. I like to tell this story — I actually saw it in a TV drama, though somebody told me it came from some kind of book. Imagine two young fish calmly swimming through the water, and they meet coming toward them a much bigger, uglier, fiercer, aggressive fish. They're both feeling a bit nervous; they don't know what's going to happen. The fish comes close, glances at these two young fish, and says, "G'day, boys. Water's nice this morning, isn't it?"

And off he goes. The two young fish swim away, thinking, "Phew! We managed to escape that." They continue on for a moment or two, and then one fish says to the other, "What the hell is water?"

This is vedanā. We don't notice it because it's so ubiquitous. It's already moving us before we've made any choice. Choice comes later. So it's always there whether we note it or not, but there are times when we do notice. There are times when awareness can recognize it, can see it. And of course, some meditators are more sensitive to it than others, so it plays a bigger role in some people's practice than in others. But it's always happening. Whatever we're doing, the first thing that moves us is that vedanā.

What about neutral vedanā? This is controversial. The Buddha actually doesn't say "neutral." He says "neither painful nor pleasant." And the controversial bit is this: my working hypothesis is that if the Buddha says something, he means it. If he wanted to say neutral, he would have said neutral. He didn't say neutral. He said neither painful nor pleasant.

What does that mean? Well, he associates this third type with delusion, with ignorance. If I don't register something as pleasant—therefore worth grabbing hold of—and I don't register it as painful—therefore something I've got to get away from—then I don't bother to register it at all. I ignore it. I don't even notice it. I am moved to ignore it. Or if I do see it, I am moved to doubt and confusion about what to do. Should I grab this? Should I reject it? Should I grab it? Should I reject it? What do I do?

These are the flavors of delusion. And it's more complex than the first two. Pleasant and painful are very straightforward—want, don't want. A simple binary. But the third one is much more complex, and it includes neutral, but neutral is just one flavor of this third category.

That's my controversial hypothesis. I did a retreat with Bhikkhu Anālayo once and ventured this interpretation. He just wouldn't have it. I was happy to have a discussion with him, but there was no

chance. That's when I realized—whoops, this is controversial.

Now let's see if we can finish tonight. The practice.

Now, the problem with all of this about the senses is that the difficulty lies not in the sense sensitivity itself, nor in the sense object. The problem is not in our experiencing—the problem arises from the relationship between these two, the relationship between the subjective and the objective.

So the practice of tracking the sense fields is all about the affective relationships that govern our understanding of what's going on, both inside and around us.

This involves maintaining an intimacy with the immediately felt touch of the senses. And this creates a practice trajectory that takes us directly to dukkha through sentience—and in particular, physical sentience, because the touch of the senses is more clear through the body.

You'll notice the distinction we made before between the five aggregates and the six sense fields. Of the five aggregates, one is physical, four are psychological. Of the six sense fields, five are physical and one is psychological. Both cover the entirety of human experience—they both encompass both the physical and the psychological. But the schema of the sense fields is more grounded in body. So it's not surprising that the practice of the sense fields is characterized by an intimate physicality.

The ground of all experience is phassa, contact—literally touch. This is the meeting of sense sensitivity, sense object, and awareness. So when we practice the sense fields, we hold back from the physical conceptual world-building that is based on feeling. We stay as close as possible to the actual felt touch of the experience.

This is famously brought out in the Buddha's teaching to Bahiya: "Then, Bahiya, this is how you should train. In the seen, there will be just the seen. In the heard, just the heard. In the sensed, just the sensed. In the known, just the known. In this way, you should train yourself."

The emphasis is on intimacy—staying close to the immediacy of experience, along with its entanglements. We become intimate with the entanglements when they arise, with the felt touch of the entanglements, rather than becoming lost in the layers of meaning we construct on top of them.

We tend to live our lives in the top levels of our conceptual skyscrapers. Mindfulness of the sense fields is inviting us to learn to live on the ground floor, as close as possible to what is actually happening here and now.

Thank you very much. There is much here to ponder as we continue sitting in practice.

Thank you all. Take care. Good night.

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