

Dhammas (2 of 5) The Five Areas of Selfing

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Today I continue the discussion about the fourth foundation of mindfulness. There are five different areas to attend to in this foundation. Yesterday I talked about the five hindrances. Today will be about what is called the five aggregates. Tomorrow the six sense doors. Then the Seven Factors of Awakening and on Friday, the Four Noble Truths. These are wonderful lists.

There is a progression through them. The progression from yesterday is that the hindrances are what keeps us distracted in the world of desires and aversions, and our relationship to pleasure, pain, and things of the world. The alternative word for sensual pleasure, the first hindrance that appears in the suttas, is avariciousness. This means wanting to acquire things, especially things of other people. It has a lot to do with our relationship to things, desires, and pleasures. It includes what the self can get, what the self cannot get, what the self wants, and does not want.

When that kind of desire settles down and quiets, then we are more present for ourselves. At some point, we encounter the next layer of attachment, the next layer of preoccupation, which interferes with a deeper settling into peace. This layer has to do with me, myself, and mine. It is self-concern and identification, where we take different parts of our psychophysical being and we hold on to them. We assume or have the conception that “this is mine, this is me, this is my true self.”

Take something as simple and seemingly innocent as saying, “This is my hand.” I appropriate it as being “mine.” And in some sense it is. But when I say “my hand,” then it's associated with “me,” and maybe I think my hand is the best hand in the world or the worst hand in the world. And so here I am holding it up in front of all of you. If I'm attached to this as “my hand,” then I could be either completely proud of showing it off or completely miserable that you're seeing this thing that's mine. So the idea of “my hand” can be innocent or it can come with a lot of baggage. That baggage is called selfing.

Or I might conceive of my hand as “me.” If someone brushes against it in a hard way, then they're offending me because the hand is me. We're taking something innocent and assuming that it represents me as a person.

Or I take my hand as being my true self. That is the essence of who I am: hand-ness. I'm ready to argue with everyone or insist that this is *my* hand-ness and I protect my hand at all cost. I don't want it to die or get old because it's essentially who I am. Maybe that's a silly example. But I'm hoping that you can apply it to yourself.

This action of selfing – in extreme forms, it takes the form of conceit, which is a very strong attachment to self. It has a lot to do with identification. Not identifying who we are in some simple way like man, woman, non-binary, trans, gender nonconforming – all kinds of other options. But there is a way of leaning into it too much – holding on to it. If we are clinging and holding tight in such a way that as the vagaries of life encounter us, they either challenge that deep attachment or reinforce it. There is selfing going on.

In the Buddha's teaching, the idea is to be sensitive to the contraction, stickiness, resistance, pushiness, or neediness that seems to be related to selfing. It can sometimes be experienced very simply as contraction, tightness, or inner pressure. It can be experienced as wanting or not wanting. It can be experienced as ideas that we swirl around in. In fact, selfing has a lot to do with the ideas and concepts we live in. Sometimes they're so deep that we don't even see them.

For example, you walk into the waiting room of a doctor's office and sit down in one of the many empty chairs. You sit in that chair for a long time and then get up to go to the bathroom. When you come back, lo and behold, someone's sitting in the same chair that you were sitting in. Your initial reaction could be, "How could they be sitting in *my* chair?" There's an identification with the chair and me that might arouse anger. "A person is sitting in it, while there are lots of other chairs around."

This can happen in all kinds of small ways throughout the day. It is possible to begin to be sensitive to this movement of selfing so that we are no longer caught up in the coarser surface desires of wanting and not wanting, and the confusion that follows, namely, the hindrances.

Interestingly, what the Buddha wants us to do is to recognize in our simplest forms of experience the five different foundations for what he thinks is constructing a self. Sometimes the foundation is our body, the form. Sometimes it is based on our feelings. Sometimes it is based on our ideas of things, our concepts – in English, it is called perception. This is the third aggregate. And sometimes it has to do with the stories we make up – the impulses, intentions, motivations, and opinions we have. This is the fourth aggregate. The fifth one is consciousness, the idea that we can be aware, that we can know. Some people very strongly associate that with a feeling almost of am-ness – "I am" and, "Of course, that's who I am." So these are the different areas that people sometimes focus on in the construction of identity, in the construction of self, in the preoccupation with self.

As an exercise today, you might spend a period of time on each of the five aggregates. See how much self-concern there is around your body – what you look like, your bodily pleasure and displeasure. How much preoccupation with self is connected to how you feel – happy or sad – all kinds of ways? And how much preoccupation with self is about your opinions, your history, your story, your biography, your plans, your desires, and to the whole inner world that you construct with your mind? And then how much is related to consciousness?

The five aggregates are where the Buddha wants us to look. But he wants us to look and see for a particular reason. Not to negotiate, not to abandon it, not to let go of it even, not to make a problem out of it, but to see it clearly. To see it this way. To be quiet enough to see that each of these five areas – when we don't cling to them too much, or don't overlay our ideas too much – can be experienced as something that is flowing, something that's arising and passing, something that appears and disappears, something that's very inconstant, changing, fluxing, moving.

Our being is a river of changing sensations, experiences, thoughts, and emotions. The idea is to relax into that river, and float or be massaged by it or settle in. Attachment to self and selfing is like taking a bucket of that water out and freezing it and saving it for the future. But it's no longer the river.

The idea is not to attack or feel upset about the selfing that goes on, but rather to look more deeply and see that underneath the self-concern, we can notice how that takes us out of the flow of life, the movement of the present moment. If the present moment is a river, notice how retrospective thinking, fantasizing, and getting caught up in conversations in your head take you out of that river.

So the five areas of selfing are the body; feelings; the basic, simple concepts and ideas that we live by; the complicated mental constructions and stories about our lives, our motivations; and consciousness. You don't necessarily have to remember them all. But you might become sensitive to how much selfing goes on.

I think for many people, the primary subject that fuels their thinking is the self. It is me, myself, and mine. We're either center stage or somehow important in the thoughts and concerns we have. Just watching our thought stream and recognizing how much selfing is a part of it is a fascinating study.

To do this as a mindfulness exercise is to try to see it as selfing. See it as a reification, a solidification, of the ongoing river of life that we live in. And in doing so, start experiencing some freedom and independence from those attachments to self.

I realize this week is a bit of a whirlwind tour of the five different areas of the fourth foundation. Hopefully, it's useful to have a general sense of these very important parts of mindfulness practice. Maybe some other time we can go into some more depth with each of them.

Thank you all very much.