

Dharma Talk: Five Bundles and Profound Contemplation

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So I ended a talk yesterday with this reference to being whole, that which is part of the whole, that which is wholesome. And this is a very important word in the Buddhist teachings. And the opposite is what's unwholesome. The Pāli, it's a little bit of an interpretive translation of the Pāli. Another translation that's used commonly is skillful and unskillful. And sometimes skillful and unskillful works well when it has no ethical connotations, but often it has a kind of ethical connotations of... It's almost like this word *kusala* means ethics, ethical, but not in any puritanical or moralistic way, but rather a deep kind of connection to what is healthy, what is nourishing, what supports the whole, the whole of who we are.

And there are some movements of the mind, of the heart, that connect us to all of who we are, and some which separate us from parts of who we are, and limit us. And keeps part of us contained within a certain subsection of our body, subsection of our emotional life, subsection of our mental life. And it's particularly the survival instincts, which I think of as important at times, but there are more surface responses, like the muscles have to respond. Whereas this deeper, profound response comes from the organs, comes from the electrical system in a different way, comes from maybe hormones, or something that courses through or connected to the body as a whole that works better when the whole is in harmony, whole is communicating with itself. And so if we misunderstand the dangers and think that life is always dangerous, that fear that's particular somehow or other gets translated or transformed into anxiety, that is not about immediate danger, but is about an imagined danger. Maybe it's something that might happen, but still it's imagined into the future.

And so then some people can live chronically anxious, and that anxiety limits them considerably. And I've certainly found myself getting suddenly very anxious about something. Something was maybe dangerous, but I misunderstood and had a fantasy about it and what it was.

And so I was living in an anxiety about something, and I made poor choices. Other times where there was a danger and I was certainly afraid. But it didn't make me anxious, didn't separate me from myself, but it actually helped me to be more present, more careful, more fully in it, the situation. And I was grateful for the fear.

So, but this chronic anxiety that it's so easy to develop, it's the unfortunate thing about it is how much it limits our life, limits our connection to ourselves, to our hearts, to our wisdom, and it also limits us to our life, to our connection to the life around us, to the natural world, to our social world. And so we become partial. We're not whole anymore. And when the survival instincts are combined with great hate and delusion, it's understood in Buddhism that greed, hate and delusions are clearly form limits, formally, clearly bound us into a subsection of who we are. They get our attention focused in a particular direction to what we want and the muscles and the thoughts and the concerns that support the desire. And if there is ill will, and we really get into that, we're also limited by that. We don't see clearly. And so we see, you know, the object of our ill will and see it probably in a skewed way. And our muscles, our eyes and everything is limited and oriented towards what we don't like. And so delusion also just keeps us confused and disconnected from ourselves and also from others, from the world.

And so a lot of the suffering we have is also a form of disconnect from the whole. Suffering involves some kind of attachment, some kind of... The suffering that we're addressing in Buddhism is not all things we could call emotional pain, but the suffering we're addressing is that which is born from attachment, from craving, from clinging, which are these constricting forces that narrow the field of attention, narrow the field of sensitivity, narrow the field of wisdom and intellect and motivation and all kinds of things. And so when there's this suffering, part of the reason it's painful, how limited it makes us, how separated it makes us, how constricted it makes us, and how there's an alienation of parts of ourselves. And so part of Buddha's practice is to let go of the clinging, let go of attachments, but to overemphasize that, I think those people are disservice, as if all we're supposed to do is just let go. And in fact, I was one of those people who would teach that.

When I was a new teacher, you know, I had a wonderful time practicing as a monastic, and it was very significant. Life transforming for me into that practice. But I was young and didn't have a lot of life experience, and I kind of had this idea, it's easy, just let go. And so I said, just let go. And then I had kids in the family life. And then I started to understand the challenges people live under, the complexity of their inner life, complexity of their outer life, and all the different kind of challenges, conflicts, that exist in someone who's living in these complicated

lay life that many people are living. And I began appreciating that it's not so simple. It's not just about letting go. And we need much more. We're... We're whole ecosystems, ourselves as individuals, ourselves in our family unit, ourselves in the world. And the ecosystems are not a simple thing. So we want to somehow find a way to understand the ecosystem or maybe not understand it always, but have it all work together in its whole, the way it's meant to operate.

So the wholesome are those motivations, those mental states, the mental activity, ways of thinking, ways of wanting, ways of averting, turning away from things, saying no to things, that are part of the whole that doesn't limit us, doesn't bound us, doesn't keep us caught. And that helps us open up and feel the whole and participate in a wholehearted, whole-minded, whole-bodied way with the life we have. And so it's possible to feel the difference. It's possible to feel and sense a life of chronic anxiety, how limiting it that makes us. It's possible to feel how a life of continuous kindness, generosity... that's done authentically, it really fills us with a feeling of contentment, satisfaction, joy, connectedness, a sense of purpose and meaning that kind of feeds and nourishes many parts of our psyche, our heart.

And the Buddha, in fact, began sometimes his discussion about the practice of not to let go exactly. But to do a kind of variation of that, which is to be generous. To practice generosity, to live generously, doesn't mean letting something leave you, leave your hand. Here, have this. But it doesn't narrow us. It's not greed. But rather, and it's not a letting go that kind of diminishes us because we don't even know, maybe we're letting go of even what we shouldn't let go of. But generosity can have this buoyant feeling, and really done well and appreciation, not discounting it, but allowing us to feel the health of that, the goodness of that, opens up to this fullness of being.

The Buddha then taught ethics, not ethics again, to limit ourselves. Many people have lived an ethical life that was too much trapped in strict law rules and morality and judgmentalism and fear and all kinds of things that comes along with some people in the ethical world or how they're taught it. For the Buddha, it was the opposite, that to live the ethical life, the final precepts, the purpose of it was to give a gift, give to yourself, give to others, to enrich the The Buddha's vision was that our good hearts are phenomenally wonderful. Our inner life is something, there's a tremendous goodness here. And we don't want to diminish it. We don't want to sacrifice it. And the Buddha saw that being unethical and bringing the precepts is actually harming ourselves. And why would you want to harm yourself? Why would you want to harm anyone else when you know that it diminishes the precepts the grander of this full life, the wholeness of who we are.

And he did teach letting go, renunciation, but only because he knew it was possible to let go of the things that are unwholesome, the things that took us out of the whole. He wants us to return to the whole. And there's always wonderful teaching that he gave where he said, if... Doing what is wholesome benefits you, I teach you to do it. If doing the unwholesome doesn't benefit you, harms you, then don't do it. And what this teaching is, is saying that we're supposed to become our own teacher. We're supposed to feel and sense the effect that things have on us. And you don't have to let go of something wholesome. If it enhances you and supports you and go, when it did not say let go of that. But you let go of the wholesome, even the wholesome, maybe if you cling to it or attach to it or somehow or other, it harms you, maybe because you have too much of it. Too much of this wholesome thing can be harmful and, you know. And like with food, there's wholesome, nourishing food up to a limit of how much you eat. And so, the wholesome.

So on one hand, the Buddha talks about cultivating the wholesome, growing the wholesome, letting the wholesome become abundant in us. This is a very strange language for me to hear, learn, coming out of 10, 20 years, both of Zen practice and in modern Theravāda Buddhist practice, teaching, where it was really never really any emphasis on building up the wholesome and building up and expanding joy and happiness. If anything, you were told, like Kaua Vint. Don't do that. That's a distraction. Sometimes it was described to be the work of Māra to cultivate and develop these things, just straight into emptiness, just being, you know, or straight into just pure mindfulness without any, you know, just see it clearly. And if you have too much joy, you don't see it clearly. Let go. Something like that. So I was very surprised when I learned that there's a lot of joy in the practice. There can be a rapture. There can be a tremendous, beautiful feelings of happiness. Some people call it bliss. It's allowed. So to cultivate that and make it abundant and have it spread throughout your body, or the teachings of the Buddha. And this idea of spreading throughout the body is to make it whole, expand out into the whole of who we are. And this is very healing. It's one of the reasons why concentration practice can be very healing for some people, because one way that concentration practice is taught is to have the well-being that comes from concentration spread out throughout all the places where we're wounded or where we're blocked or we're limited or where we're resisting. And to have that warmth of the well-being of *samādhī*, spread into those, and kind of melt, dissolve, evaporate some of the things that are quite limiting for us.

So yesterday I talked about stories that the hindrances of relatively complicated cognitive events, doesn't always feel that way, but there's stories involved, beliefs involved. And the

particular part of our psychophysical being that makes up harmful stories is called *saṅkhāra*. *Saṅkhāra*, the word means both that which constructs and what is constructed. And what does it construct? It constructs stories. It constructs stories in particular about who we are. And it makes up stories. And unfortunately, a fair amount of our self-identity, how we understand ourselves, how we understand the relationship to the world around us, is made up. It's a social construct. Sometimes the social construct of the world helps us to construct. Sometimes we construct it on our own. And *saṅkhāras* are kind of things we make up.

And the metaphors that Buddha uses for this are things that humans make, that do not exist in the natural world by themselves. The most classic metaphor in Buddhism for this is a potter's pot. A potter can make a beautiful pot, and we appreciate handcrafts and the value of that for sure. But for the Buddha, a clay pot does not exist in the natural world. It's an artifice of human construction. And they use other examples. He used like a trap that traps animals. He's a metaphor for this human construct. A trap is dangerous for someone. But a trap is also something that's constructed by people. And the idea is to destroy the traps that we get caught in. He uses the metaphor of a house that's been built. Normally, you know, houses don't exist by themselves. They don't, nature doesn't kind of like put it all together. Nature, humans have to gather the wood, the material, to build the house, to construct the house. And it's a beautiful thing to do, and we admire people who can do that. Yeah. Not to be dismissive and disrespectful of having houses and building them. But it's a metaphor for this, what doesn't exist in nature, that we make up. Human imagination and human work.

And there's a very famous verse that's attributed to the Buddha saying it on the night of his enlightenment, with his enlightenment. He said, house builder, you have been seen, your rafters and beams have been shattered, have been deconstructed, never to be constructed again. So the house builder is that part of us that builds houses in our minds, builds structures of ideas and identity and stories and worlds that we live in. And some people live more in the world that they construct than the world of the natural world. And I suspect that a few of you compared to when you were young, some of you, especially who are older, probably spend more time now on screens than you did 30 years ago. What comes out of that screen is for the most part one way or the other deeply connected to the artificial humans have made up and created in the possible. Nowadays they say a lot of the news is made up. The stories, the movies, the media that we get, the reality shows, which I don't know how real they are, they have this made-upness to them. And then we take in what we see, we take in what they say the influencers say, and we buy clothes and buy this and that, and we want to get plastic surgery because we have this construct, this idea that we should somehow be different. And

so there's a tremendous industry in a lot of economics in this country that participates and supports the building up, the constructing of something which never really exists in the natural world. And a fair amount of that has to do, some of it has to do with us, who we are. And so the Buddha saw that and saw how much suffering it makes. And he saw that part of him, the attachment, the clinging, the greed, the hatred, that was creating this self-concept that didn't exist in the natural world. And with his awakening, he shattered it, destroyed it.

If that's all you hear, people shake their hand and say, this Buddha, he's just a negative guy. He just wants to destroy things. And he's so critical. He calls things defilements. So negative. Yeah. But that was only half the picture, half the story. The other half was the Buddha was talking about, let this inner life grow. Let the natural life come forth in you. You don't need the made-up world so much. You don't need to be trapped, caught by greed, hate, and delusion in the constructs of self-identity that are so huge. Not all identity is constructed, but there's a fair amount. We construct it every day in new ways. We constructed with goals. We constructed in how we are in family people. You know, when I was fascinating to go having young kids, really young kids. And they're so, you know, like for a while, like, I could feel in a wonderful way that for some months, first year or something of a kid's life, that I didn't count anymore. It didn't matter if I was tired. It didn't matter if I had to go to Safeway in my pajamas. It just, you know, I didn't matter what people thought about me. It was just like to take care of this kid, whatever was going on. And it was kind of freeing. I kind of liked it. The freedom from self-concern that it took away. It took away. And then I could feel and sense that as my children get older, that it was appropriate for me to come back into the picture. It was appropriate to be concerned about how sleep-day I was, you know, maybe I shouldn't go to Safeway in the pajamas, maybe take care of everybody else. But the, you know, so, but the shift in changing of all this, and, you know, I'd like people to think of me as a good parent.

And I don't know, probably most parents might have had this experience of being in Safeway or in a place like that. And the kid sees something on the shelf that it wants and you say no. And then the kid behaves like you have been the worst child molester in history, screaming and crying and yelling and like, you know, in Safeway. And people are thinking, wow, you're just like, it must be an awful parent. What have you done? We call the police. No, you can't have, you know, more cookies, something. So that's challenging to the self-construct of being a nice guy, kind guy, and what do people think about me? And, you know, it's fascinating to have to go through this. and figure out what to do with a kid like that. And I remember walking with him in some market. He was old enough to understand things, and he was wanting everything. Remember, when he was younger, I would be holding him. It was fascinating. I

was holding him nicely down the aisles. And he didn't know what was behind him, but he knew he wanted it. So he would go his hand like this behind him. And so one day he was older, we were walking down the aisles together, and he wanted this and that. And I said to him, I think a desire troll has taken you over. And he looked at me like I was crazy. You've got to be kidding. So, you know, this idea of self and who we are when you're a parent, it's a certainly fascinating world to be living in shifts and changes and you try to hold on too much to one identity, one idea of how you're supposed to be.

Maybe I told this story recently, but one of the reasons I went to live at Zen Center was because every time I came to Zen Center to visit. Every time I was playing my social games that I played with my friends, meaning I would try to present myself in a way that they would see me and know me as being different than who I was, but rather who I wanted them to be, wanted them to see me as. So I'd pretend to be smart or do something. But they participated in it, and they probably were doing it too. But when I went to Zen Center, the people there were like mirrors. They didn't respond in the way they were supposed to. It was like, it was just like, it just didn't go anywhere. It bounced right off them and I could see what I was doing. And I was so happy to have that mirror. It was kind of painful. But I wanted to live in a place where I was supported and helped not be caught up in this construct of self and playing these constructed games of proving who I was and all that. So the alternative is this growth of something beautiful, the growth from within, growth of what makes us whole.

So one of the key teachings that the Buddha gave had to do with something called the five aggregates. And aggregates I think of as something you make with cement. You know, it's not a very appetizing word. The, either my preferred translation of it is bundle, and it's that accumulated bundles of attachments we have, especially attachments around who we are. And there are five areas in our life that the Buddha pointed to where we start accumulating these bundles of attachments, bundles of clinging. And in talking about it, I'll offer you an analogy. If deep in the forest, maybe there's a place no one's ever gone before, and a botanist goes into the forest. The botanist is only interested in identifying the plants in the area. And the botanist comes across a big, majestic tree with wonderful leaves and beautiful flowers. And the botanist simply focuses on the morphology of the leaves, shapes of the flowers, until seeing what species, what form of plant this is. And as soon as a botanist recognizes the name, that's enough. It goes off somewhere else to identify other plants. A botanist is just interested in how the plant appears, its shape, and the name that goes associated with it.

Someone else goes in the forest, and lo and behold, they see the same tree. But this person is really oriented towards pleasure and avoiding being uncomfortable. And they see this tree

with these beautiful flowers. And the flowers smell so wonderful. Never been a perfume so nice. And the person just spends a long time just luxuriating in the colors and the smell. And the person is so enamored by it. Every day the person visits. There's a well-worn trail into the forest because that bird is going there all the time. The person doesn't know anything about the name of the tree. Doesn't know anything about how it grows or its psychology or anything. She just knows how pleasant it is.

Another person is a wood carver. And the wood carver is only interested in the quality of the wood for carving. So it wants to recognize, has a particular purpose. It wants to recognize, identify if the tree has the kind of wood that serves the purpose of making what's going to be carved. And maybe chips out a piece of the wood, peels it, puts its fingernails in or something, and really gets a sense. Is this the right kind of wood? And maybe it is. Those that come back would get more of it, cut down the tree or something. But it's mostly focused just, is it to identifying how it's useful for someone else comes in who's an unrepentant romantic, and they see the tree. The beautiful lush green leaves, how it's modeled, shade underneath, the color and the smell, and the grass under the tree. This is the perfect place for a picnic with the lover. Here's where they can come and have wonderful grapes and sandwiches and read poetry to each other, be all cuddly, and this is going to be great. And so the person makes fantasies and stories and goes home and can't stop thinking about all the things that the two of them are going to do under that tree. And so the anticipation of the stories and the joy and the fulfillment that comes just from having the fantasies is enough to keep that person so locked in those dreams. The person never calls up their friend to ask them to go to the tree because distracted by these fantasies caught in the stories.

And the last person that comes into the forest to see the tree is a painter. And the painter decides to paint the tree. And the painter loves, gets really absorbed and deeply engaged in painting the tree. But what the painter really delights in is this wonderful kind of cognitive way of seeing shapes and colors and details and recognizing it, and then translating it to the brush and putting it on the canvas, and the cognition and the knowing that has to go right there and be present. Well, the painter loves the painting. What's really loved is the way that cognition, consciousness, is so alive and present and undistracted and so clean, just doing the simple act of figuring out the painting. And that's what really matters for the painter, is the brightness of the consciousness that's there.

So these are five areas that correspond to the five aggregates, the five bundles. The first is appearance. Some people get really attached to appearances, how they look, how other people look. I could probably write you an autobiography of my life based on the length of my hair.

Where's I attached? Right. To hair, I don't know. I certainly had all kinds of different selves that I lived, that could be measured by how long my hair was. And I think I had longer hair than anybody here, so currently at one point, for example. And then I sew appearances, and we know that that's a big deal for a lot of people. It's a whole industry for about appearances and making them good. And it's been said that some people spend more time and money concerned with what they wear than the words that come out of their mouth, which is more important, which has the biggest effect on the world.

And then the second aggregate is the feeling tones, pleasant and unpleasant. And some people, just maybe by innate disposition, are very oriented to pleasure and having pleasure and avoiding discomfort. Comfort and having comfort, avoiding discomfort. And so much of their life is oriented around this and fixing this and adjusting everything in accordance with that. Where's the most pleasant place in the room to sit? What's the most pleasant this and that? How do I avoid whatever is unpleasant? And so there's a lot of attachment around pleasure.

The third type of aggregates has to do with perception, recognition, moments of cognition, the recognition of what something is, the idea of what something is. And some people are attached to their ideas, their recognition, their names, the concepts that they have that they apply to things. And so there's a lot of social concepts of how we see other people. We see people through the filter, the particular concept that we recognize them, and we have racism. We have objectification of people. We have hostility. We have avoidance. We have desire. We have wanting. We have fear. And because somehow or other we have an act of recognition that sees ourselves or see other people through that lens. And that's the end of the story, rather than taking time to get to know the person, the fullness, the wholeness of the person. And we get attached to these things.

The fourth aggregate bundle is the story-making mind, the mind that constructs things. And it turns out for the Buddha, it's this constructing, making up part of the mind which constructs an identity around the other four. So if we think we, I am how I appear, that's my true self. Some way or other, my identity, who I am is through my appearance. What makes that identity, what creates it, is this *saṅkhāra*, this constructing, story-making mind. I am the one who has pleasure. I am the pleasure. I am my recognition. I am this belief, this thought. This is what I am. It's kind of a story.

And then the last one is usually translated as consciousness in English, but I believe that's inaccurate from the ancient teaching. No one knows what consciousness is anyway, or everyone knows what it is, but everyone has different ideas. It's really hard to stick the word

consciousness. But what makes a lot of more sense to understand it in the Buddha's teaching, which everything else and kind of fits the other better, is cognition. Cognition can be momentary. Consciousness can be felt, experienced like a unified field of awareness, and it can feel more permanent, constant. Whereas cognition can be seen as a moment of recognition, a moment for knowing something. And one theory of how to understand some of the Buddhist theories of consciousness is that consciousness is a sum total working of all the different moments of cognition that we have. And so it's similar to the old 8mm movie where they would project a whole series of still shots on the movie screen, but they are flashing on and off so quickly that the mind constructs each little moment of cognition into movement on the screen. But there's no movement on the screen. That's created in the mind. So that consciousness is a byproduct of all these little moments of consciousness that is also, that's a constructed sense of something, a field of something. You don't have to agree with me, but the... So these are the five areas that people will hang on to. This is who I am. And for some people, consciousness is a thing that they hold on. This is who I truly am, this consciousness. And so the Buddha is saying, each of these things makes us partial. Each of this takes a piece of the whole and removes it from the whole.

And so who are we? What is the tree? The tree itself is not preoccupied by the shape of its leaves. The tree itself is not concerned about the pleasure it's providing a human being coming by. The tree itself is not concerned about whether this is good wood to carve. The tree itself doesn't separate the roots from the trunk, from the branches, from the leaves, from the flowers. There's no sharp line for the tree. It's all the working of a whole, in a sense, tree ecosystem. It's a whole process that's working together. It's one whole. It never occurs to the tree to divide them. This is who I really am. We're like a tree. We are amazingly sophisticated, complex ecosystems, beautiful ecosystems. It's phenomenal all the different functions, processes going on inside of us that keeps us alive, engaged, knowing, seeing, smelling, living in the world. It's phenomenal how much goes on without us having to do anything. We don't have to direct the show. And it's kind of weird that we obsess so much as if it's the whole world for that little sliver 0.000000000001% it's approximate of the whole that we have some role in changing and doing something and being involved in. We put so much emphasis in this little piece. It's maybe an important piece, since it's the only part we have choice over, but there's so much more here going on. And so what we learn, what we're doing here in part, and freeing ourselves of attachments, freeing ourselves from these forces that limit us, is to allow the wholeness of who we are to be here.

And so one way to describe who we are, if we want to describe or name or accurately indicate

who we are then, in the Buddhist way, is to say, someone says, well, what are you? Who are you? And you answer, I am such. I am thus. Some people would be infuriated by the answer, because they didn't give them any of the important information that would peg you. Someone told me recently about his reluctance to tell people his last name, because he knew when people were asking his name, that they would recognize what social class he was in from the name. They're going to peg him in a particular way. But why? Why not accept people? Why not be ourselves, whole, us? And that's, in fact, how the Buddha most described himself. It seems from what the record says. He didn't call himself very often Buddha, didn't refer to him by his family name Gotama. And apparently he didn't have the name Shākyamuni until about 500 years after he died. So he didn't use that name for himself. He referred to himself kind of in the first person. His most common way of talking about himself was the one who is such, the one who is such, or the one that is thus. Some of you know this expression because usually translating to English as a thus-gone one, but that second part can also mean the thing, the thing that is this particular way. So the one who is such, the one who is thus.

What would it be like for you to give yourself the gift, give yourself the permission to just be thus? We might say in modern English, to just be. Just be, just be with no part left out. All, everything's allowed to be here. This too is included without the operation of this mind that makes things up, that defines things, that limits things, that selects out of the whole particular part that seems like the thing that is so important to hold on to and be defined by. I've met people who... At times it seems like the thing that most define them in the moment is being the apologizer. That's what they're like, wow, it's okay to apologize, but to become, that's who you are. That's so limited. But to be unlimited, do not limit yourself in any way. To be able to go out here and look at the stars and allow yourself to be like a star, just shining, radiating, being. And you have just as much right to be alive and present in this moment without judgment, without the past and future, without being different than that moment as the stars in the sky, or during the day looking at the sky or the clouds, the leaves or the trees, and seeing the vastness of them, they're just such. We can give the trees and the sky the gift of not defining them, not limiting them, letting them just be themselves. The tree is just a tree. The sky can be the sky. Each of those things has been liberated from ourselves, from our desires, our wants, our versions. And can we give ourselves that gift? Can we give ourselves the gift of just being, the suchness of the moment, the gift of not having us be the object of our definitions and identities and desires and aversions and wanting things to be different. To be here, now, in the fullness of the moment, the fullness of who we are.

And it can be, that can happen in degrees, so that to do this well, you have to include in

the fullness, the wholeness of it all, the ways that you don't do it. This too, okay, this too I'll include. Look at that, I'm narrowing myself just to be something. Open to that. Keep opening, this too is part of the suchness. This too can be there. So that we allow the natural forces within us, a chance to grow and move and develop and help us become more of a whole. And we appreciate the value, the importance, the benefit of not doing the unwholesome, that which separates us from the whole. So as I end this talk, may the koan, may the curiosity, may the question of what is it to be whole? Live in you, not that something you're going to answer, but something you're going to live. May you live your wholeness. Thank you.