Dharmette: The Bundles (1 of 5) Appearances

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So hello and welcome to this first talk of the week and the series. The topic of the week is what is usually called the *five aggregates*. The word "aggregates" seems a bit, maybe even off-putting, kind of dry, kind of cement-like. It is kind of not clear what it actually refers to.

I call the *five bundles* a little bit more, maybe an image of five bundles that are like gathering firewood into a bundle, fire sticks, and wrapping them up with strings so they are all tied together nicely. Five bundles. But usually in English, they are called the *five aggregates*.

I was first introduced to these extremely important teachings in Buddhism, and they kind of sit at the center of the Buddha's teachings in many ways. In Zen as well, when I practiced Zen, it is very important there because every day, almost—I think every day—we chanted the *Heart Sutra*, a short scripture that begins with a statement that all five aggregates are empty. Then it goes on to say each of these aggregates is empty, and emptiness is the aggregates.

I didn't understand what was being talked about when I chanted these in Zen for most of the time, but I took in this idea naively: that if all five aggregates are empty, if all five aggregates, then I didn't have to know what they are. It was kind of like they do not exist, or they are not that important, or they are—so I never really bothered to understand them. They were more just something that we are supposed to deny.

And the repetition of "no form, form is emptiness, emptiness is form." The same is true of sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Then it goes on to say, "no eyes, no ears, no tongues." All this negative, negation language. And chanting that day after day, the effect of that was to kind of let go, let go, let go.

Not have any of these ideas, and it was kind of enchanting. You know, in a kind of vigorous Zen chanting mode, it was quite, quite a wonderful thing. And I found that when I chanted this

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in Zen, I memorized it, and those chants would come wafting through the mind periodically through the day. They were kind of freeing in a certain way. It was wonderful to do, but I never really learned what they were.

And then when I came to Thailand to practice in *Theravāda*, they actually talked about the aggregates a lot. I started to realize they were something to study and learn what they were, try to figure out what they were. I spent a lot of time trying to understand them. It was not so obvious what to really understand what they are, and, you know, it has been a lot of research time.

Really, these five—they are usually called form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. It is usually described as something like the Buddha said, "There's no self." But what he said is that there are these five aggregates. These five aggregates make up what we normally would call the self. So there is no essential being, self, but there are these processes that go on, and that is what we are.

And so, five aggregates, like the aggregates of stone that come together, or something that comes to be combined into something. So as I have studied these texts, I have come to understand them differently. At least in the earliest Buddhist tradition, they are better called bundles, and they are bundles of clinging. They are things we cling to, and we collect these clingings, and we gather a lot of them.

And the five bundles are not meant to describe what we are as a human being. They are meant to describe the five major bundles of things, collections of things that we cling to when we cling and suffer. And what is fascinating about this in the early tradition is that these five bundles are not really things that exist in the natural world in an ordinary way. They are something we kind of build or create in the mind. We create ideas of things, stories about things.

And maybe it is going to be understood with the first one, which is usually translated into English as form, F-O-R-M. And form kind of means like a shape. What it meant in the early tradition was the shape, the shape of something that the eyes could see as distinct things. The sight object was called a form. But by application, it came to mean anything that the senses picked up in the world.

And so I like to call it appearances. It is not things. It is not objects. It is not the body when we are looking at ourselves. But rather, it is the form or the appearance through which we see the body, understand the body.

And when we use the word appearance rather than form, things appear selectively. Things

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appear partly. We are not innocent observers of the body. We have particular things we look for as the appearances that are important. We can say that someone is very interested in their appearances.

And we think that they maybe spend a lot of time on their hair, a lot of careful time on their clothes, maybe their complexion, maybe getting tans. Maybe who knows all these things? It means it is only skin deep, kind of. It is only kind of the surface that is really important here. It is not what is going on deep inside.

So the heart beating could be called an appearance, but it is also called just a raw sensation, without the overlay of ideas and selectivity about what is important, what should happen, what should not happen, with a simple beating heart. We can add a lot on top of it, especially if we have a heart condition. But we can also add all kinds of unusual ideas, like really, the heart should have a better beat. It should not just beat kind of that boring old way it always does. And I wish it had, you know, a more lively beat and a roll sometimes, and a, you know.

And so we are looking for certain things in our heart. We are adding all these ideas on the poor heart that it should be different. Appearances are not innocent. We add things, and so the appearances that other people have, that we apply to them—we look at certain people, and we are oriented toward certain appearances that jump out.

We might look at skin color, and that jumps out with all kinds of associations because we think skin color is what defines a person or identifies a person in a particular big way. And we limit people by their skin color, by their hair, by their—people who are interested in the shape of their nose, maybe their, you know, certain other shapes of other parts of their body. Maybe their size. We jump to conclusions based on whether someone is short or someone is really tall. We see the appearance, but we add something to appearance: value, judgments, expectations, associations.

We are not innocent observers, and some of this, what we do with appearances, is very painful for ourselves, very painful for others. Some people can look at their hand, and maybe their fingers are too long, too short, too stubby, too fat, too wrinkled, too much arthritis, all kinds of things we can see, knobby. But those are all the appearances that we look at. What is hard to understand is that the hand has its own life, independent of the appearances we are focused on.

The hand, you know, as a hand with long fingers, might be just relaxed, at ease. It just kind of tingles and vibrates and feels warm and cold and feels sensations by itself. It is just fine. Leave it alone. Do not impose the mind's hegemony on top of it, the mind's judgments.

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And so what we learn in mindfulness practice is that appearances have an emptiness to them. The appearances are kind of insubstantial, kind of projections of ideas on top of it about what is important, where we orient, what we focus on, in order to interpret that this is what something is. From the inside out, with the eyes closed, the hand is almost not a hand. It is just sensations that are humming and vibrating.

So physical appearances are partly a product of the mind, and sometimes they are big products. There are huge stories that go around it. The mind makes up stories of how it should be, should not be, what it means, and a lot of suffering occurs around appearances. There are huge industries, billion-dollar industries in the world, that are making lots of money trying to define how you should look and what you should do to make yourself look a certain way.

And if you do not, then you are somehow an inferior person. We have all these stories and ideas that we inherit, that we make up ourselves, and there is a lot of suffering. And it is not just we have one or two of these; we collect bundles of attachments to appearances, negative attachments, positive attachments. And what mindfulness can do is help us to relax, settle all these stories we make, all these attachments we have to appearances.

We start seeing that there is a world of difference between seeing our body through the attachments, the expectations, the stories we have, the meanings we have, versus just feeling sensations coming and going by themselves, leaving them alone. And so part of mindfulness is to see this distinction between what the mind creates around sensations, experiences of the body, and what the experience is in and of itself. And in this regard, it might be easier to understand that appearances are empty. Appearances are empty of real substantiality. They are just a figment of the imagination to a big degree.

Sometimes there is strict correlation between how we understand the body and what the body is. But the stories that we add on top of it—that is what appears. The word appearance, the Pāli word is *rūpa*. That is what is implied. It is all the attachments.

The aggregates are not the appearance in and of itself, but rather it is the attachments, the stories that we add on top of it, and those are what are empty, insubstantial. And they are figments of the imagination, but we gather bundles of these, bundles and bundles. Some people carry suitcases full, warehouses full, of attachments, stories, ideas related to their body, and they can cause a tremendous amount of suffering. And we create a lot of suffering about others when we project our expectations and ideas onto others as well.

So I hope in this way you begin understanding why this word—why this—we are talking about something very central in Buddhism, because it is freedom from these bundles of clinging

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that opens the door to a very profound freedom. And so the idea is to understand where the source of the suffering comes from. And this is one of the primary sources the tradition talks about. To call them aggregates misses; it is confusing for people.

To call them bundles, we begin appreciating that they are bundles of clinging. And the word clinging is often in the very title or name for them: the *five bundles of clinging*. And so we are not seeing the thing in and of itself. We are seeing how it fits into this wider field of attachments that we are so caught in. And we can relax.

To see we are doing it gives a possibility to drop below that level of attachments, to untie the bundles, and to be able to give our body the freedom to just be itself, to breathe itself. It is a remarkable gift. So this week I will go through the other four bundles, and hopefully you will understand why this is an important topic in Buddhism, and maybe it can be useful, important for you as a different perspective of how to understand your suffering. Thank you.

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