Dharmette: The Bundles (2 of 5) Sensations.

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So hello, and welcome to the second talk on the five bundles. In the language of the Buddha, they're called the five *khandhas*. And *khandhas* can mean a mass, a grouping of things.

And what we're looking at here is five ways in which we group our clingings, five areas by which we hold on and tie together big bundles of attachments. And the reason the Buddha focuses on this is that attachment, or clinging itself—the word is clinging more than attachment—clinging is one of the primary sources of suffering: the compulsion of clinging, the insistence of clinging, the uncompromising nature of clinging, the holding tight and contracting and being tight, and being disappointed or being aggressive and assertive and conceited. All based on a kind of holding on tight to ideas, to preferences, to opinions, to ideas of self.

There's a whole world of things that we are clinging to, and this early Buddhist tradition emphasizes that freedom—a profound freedom, a profound ability to live for the care of the world—comes with non-clinging. And rather than just say, ”Don't cling,” the early tradition says, study your clinging. Understand what you're clinging to. Understand how clinging works.

It's like understanding a magic trick. If you can watch the same magic trick and not understand how it's done, it can seem magical. It seems amazing, and maybe you never tire seeing it. But as soon as you see how the trick is done, then you've seen enough. You tire quickly.

And so the magic trick of clinging kind of camouflages itself by being so preoccupied with what we're clinging to, the object of clinging, that we don't see that we're clinging sometimes. And there's a lot of clingings. Some of them are kind of maybe moved to the back room while we're focusing on other clingings, but there's a whole pile of them ready to be activated. And the Buddha puts them into five major categories.

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So it's the—I'm calling appearances—(*rūpa*). Today it's sensations or feeling tones (*vedanā*). Tomorrow we'll talk about recognition (*saññā*), sometimes called perception. And then *saṅkhāra*, meaning mental formations, mental constructs. And then the last one is *vijñāna*, which is usually translated as consciousness. But as you'll see, I propose a different translation when we talk about it Friday.

Yesterday I talked about *rūpa*, these appearances, usually translated as form. And the simile that Buddha gives for form is foam floating on top of a river. The river foam is not the river; it covers the river, but that's what we see when we look down at the river on the surface. And it's amorphous; it kind of has no real substance of its own. It can shift and change, you can pop it, you can reshape it in different ways, and it dissolves and goes back into the river eventually.

So appearances is what's put on top of the river of sensation. The river is of change. Our direct experience of life is a constant flow of sensations, of changing sensations. And on top of that, we put this thing called appearances—the prioritization or the concepts, the ideas of what we think is important—in the world of appearances. But they're insubstantial, just like clothing fashions change over time; they come and they go. They're just foam that is there for a while and disappears.

For the next bundle, it's *vedanā*. I'm calling it sensations. More commonly, *vedanā* is usually translated as feeling tones. The simile for it is rain falling on the river. The rain just drops; it makes a little splash, and then it becomes the river. But it doesn't last very long; it's just momentary.

And the world of sensations, the world of feeling tones, are in and of themselves momentary little sparks of the nerves firing to give us pleasure and pain, to give us smell and taste and sounds and sights. It's the simplest way in which sense experience is sensed: the sensations that come up from sense experience. And those sensations can have qualities of pleasure and pain built into them. They come along with that. So sometimes we emphasize the sensations, the characteristics of them, and sometimes we emphasize how they're pleasant and unpleasant.

But they're still momentary. We don't often experience the momentary, and the Buddhist understanding for that is that we have ideas, stories. We have preoccupations with them sometimes that make them seem more solid than they actually are. The mind constructs solidity in the same way that the old, you know, sixteen-millimeter movies had all these still shots shot on the screen, but the mind constructed movement through them.

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So the mind is thinking and considering and reflecting and making up stories and reminding, and that preoccupation of the mental mind with sensations sometimes makes the sensations more solid than they actually are. But as we stop thinking so much, stop reacting so much, stop telling stories about it, stop being preoccupied by these, and get calm and settled in the world of sensations, they're more like raindrops. They flitter and come and go, come and go. And they might come and go frequently, so it becomes something the mind constructs as being ongoing, continuous. But actually, they're just coming and going, sparking here and there like raindrops.

Whether that's the case or not, what is important here is that we get attached, we cling to sensations. We prefer some. Some people cling to comfort and are pursuing a lot of effort to be comfortable. Some people are aversive to discomfort, pain, unpleasantness. And sometimes a lot of human behavior is so simple; it's almost amoeba-like, for pleasure and against discomfort, what's painful. And so there's this reactivity around it.

And sometimes that—and it's not just amoeba-like—but the relationship to pain and pleasure goes through the mind's thinking about it, and analyzing it, and predicting it, and having judgments and opinions and preferences. We inherit from our—we absorb from our society, family, religions—ideas about what is allowed and not allowed, what's appropriate and not appropriate, what we are supposed to be experiencing or we're not supposed to be experiencing. And there's a complicated world of ideas that come alive when we experience sensations. And sometimes without those things, things are a lot simpler.

I remember once I was hitchhiking in Europe, and it was night. I was dropped off at dark. Couldn't see very well, but there was a small stone wall next to the road, about maybe three feet tall, and it looked like a park there. And there were trees and shrubs and greenery and grass. And I thought, ”Oh, what a nice place! I'll just sleep here for the night.”

And I rolled out my sleeping bag kind of under a big bush that had a clearing under it. And I felt very content and happy to be there, and it felt like a safe place, quiet place, a park. How nice! And I woke up in the morning to discover that I was sleeping in a cemetery, and I had actually put my sleeping bag on top of someone's grave.

And so the whole inner world of ideas came alive for me: what was nice and what was not nice, what was, you know, maybe frightening, not frightening, what was appropriate. Had I done wrong? Did I do right? What was going on? This whole world of thoughts whirled around my mind, and some of them were not comfortable. There was attachment and clinging to what was right and wrong, and fear, and all kinds of things.

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But the raw experience in the dark was very, very simple. I had my own ideas there, but they were ones that were pleasant. So we can have a whole world of ideas, concepts, beliefs, opinions, preferences around sensations, and those are not innocent. Sometimes they come with a lot of force, a lot of purpose, a lot of insistence, and what Buddhism would call clinging. And they can cause a lot of suffering.

Some people's lives are destroyed by clinging to pleasure, trying to avoid what is unpleasant. It can be extremely intense. Addictions are part of this world. And so, one of the offerings in this practice of mindfulness is to be able to tease apart, to clear the fog, so we can see the difference between sensations and the world of ideas that we have about it, and become wise about those ideas. Some of them are appropriate, but some of them are not, and some of them are less than appropriate, but actually harmful.

But more important is to see the clinging we have, and the insistence, the compulsion around things being a certain way, having to do with sensations. And can we free ourselves of the clinging? The clinging to those ideas, clinging to those beliefs. After all, the sensations themselves are fleeting. It's the clinging to the thoughts and ideas that persists and lasts sometimes for lifetimes.

Can we relax the mind's clinging? Can we relax this forcefulness of the opinions and stories we live to in relationship to sensations? The bundles, the bundle of clinging toward sensations, that is empty. All five bundles are empty. Seeing that, you'll be free of suffering.

Form, these appearances, are empty, and emptiness is the appearances. This is the bundle of sensations. So it isn't the sensations themselves, but it's the bundle. The bundle that we build up and create, that is empty. There's no substance there. That's just a gathering together of a lot of strong ideas and attachments.

And some of us carry huge bundles in relationship to sensations. So the way the Buddha talks about these bundles, he calls them *upādāna khandhas*, and the *upādāna* means clinging. It's the bundles of clinging, and we can untie them. And then the sensations are just sensations. They're not a bundle because they're not gathered together. And then there's much more freedom.

And one of the great pleasures of mindfulness meditation is when we can just relax into the river, the flow of sensations, and just absorb them and receive them, and kind of just let them move through us, free of our attachment. So thank you. We'll continue tomorrow.

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