Dharmette: The Bundles (4 of 5) Story Making

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So, hello and welcome to this fourth talk on the five bundles, the five *khandhas*, in the *Pāli* language. And I've been pointing out that this is a very important teaching in the early tradition of Buddhism. It kind of represents the primary activities of mind that create the buildup, the bundle of suffering that we can live in.

Our suffering is seldom just about a single thing. Rather, there is a gathering, a collecting, an accumulating of clingings, of grasping things we hold onto, are addicted to, or are caught in, that contributes to an overall package of emotional distress. And so, to understand that package, how it gets created and how it gets built, and then to untie the bundle, is to no longer contribute to it so that we do not have to suffer.

And the alternative to that is not to build something, but rather to allow something to grow. Next week, as a follow-up to this week's talk on the bundles, I'll talk about the *Seven Factors of Awakening*. The *Pāli* is more likely the seven limbs, because there is a biological association with the *Seven Factors of Awakening*. They are part of our biology, the limbs of our being that can grow, develop, and get stronger. They are kind of the alternative to being caught in these bundles of clinging.

What is possible without the resistance, the obstacles, the coverings of these bundles, is that something deep can grow and develop to a kind of fulfillment. It's a very positive orientation to human being. And so, for some people, this idea that there are bundles might seem like just a kind of depressing idea. Or this idea today, which questions in a deep way the substantial reality of the story-making mind, can also seem very off-putting. Some stories are very meaningful for us and inspiring in profoundly deep ways.

And next week there is going to be this whole other orientation of deep meaning, of deep sense of purpose, deep sense of value, that is also very inspiring. It comes from this almost

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biological nature. And the metaphors the Buddha uses for these five bundles are metaphors of things that have been constructed, engineered by human beings, that do not exist in the natural world by themselves. Whereas the metaphors for the *Seven Factors of Awakening* are the things that do exist naturally in the world.

And so, the bundle—for example, one of the metaphors for the bundles—is an animal trap that a trapper has made. The trap does not exist in the natural world, but a carefully constructed trap can catch an animal. And we construct these careful traps, careful stories. For some of us, we get caught in the stories. We get caught, and that becomes the story of our life, or the story of how we understand ourselves completely.

So the fourth bundle is called *saṅkhāra*. *Kara* means to make, and *saṃ* can mean with. We make things. We make things up. It is the making-things-up mind.

It is the part of the mind that one teacher friend of mine calls the concoctions. Someone else calls them fabrications. I call them constructs, mental constructs, where the idea is that it belongs to the world that constructs thoughts, ideas, plans, and fantasies, as opposed to something which grows.

And in the *Theravāda* tradition, in Buddhism that developed over time, these five bundles we are talking about this week came to represent the human being. So all aspects of human being are somehow shoehorned into these five areas. And so, the mental formations, or mental constructs, this fourth one, then represents all the different mental activities we do: the positive ones, the negative ones, those that cause suffering, and those that bring freedom. And so it is a very big basket.

But in the earlier tradition, there was no need or no interest in somehow getting involved in the metaphysics of what the human being actually is. Rather, the focus was how to free the human being from their suffering. What we are then is kind of a sideshow to that freedom and living that freedom. We do not have to know exactly how to put everything, shoehorn everything in.

Because the bundles were meant not to describe the whole person, but to describe the primary ways in which we create our own suffering. Some suffering might not be our creation. Deep grief, for example, could be called suffering, but that is part of the good heart sometimes, the heart that has broken or hurts or aches because of our love. It is not necessarily suffering in the Buddhist sense of it. Suffering is what we contribute and what we put together and make, that we have a big role in.

So the fourth aggregate is the most important, because that is where we create the bundles.

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That is where we make up stories and ideas about appearances, so we cling to appearances. That is where we make stories and ideas and fantasies about sensations and pleasure and pain, so we get attached to them—positive and negative attachments. That is where we create. We do not just simply recognize something as something, but we recognize it and have stories about it. We build up ideas so that we get attached to it.

So, right here next to me there is the bell, IMC's bell, and I can recognize it as a bell. But I can also create a story about how it got here, who gave it to us, what it means, how long I have been using it, how I certainly have been using it here for so long that it is probably mine. And if ever I leave IMC, certainly I have the right to take it with me. And so I am creating this story.

Each of those stories kind of adds to a little bit more attachment and clinging. That is not necessary. All that is necessary for teaching here at IMC is to know it is a bell so I can strike it properly. So this mental construct, this mental mind that makes things up, is the fourth aggregate. That is the one that makes the other items into bundles.

They do not make sensations. They do not make recognitions, but they gather them together into these big collections of attachments that we then live under the burden of, under the weight of. And so, the mind that constructs—some people love that mind because it can be amazingly creative. It can provide tremendous satisfaction and joy and purpose and meaning.

Because it can make things up that we are the prime character of a delusion of grandeur. We have wonderful dreams of how wonderful things will be if we win a billion-dollar lottery. We can just be so enamored and lost in what we can do with all that money, and how wonderful it will be, and how people will love us and we will be the center of attention. It just feels like finally we are fulfilled. We have a place. We are loved and respected.

And wouldn't it be wonderful to win the lottery? We can have fantasies and ideas, make up utopian ideas. Some of these things are appropriate. Part of the beauty of a human being is our capacity to be creative and make stories, and creative stories, or have new visions. That's a fancy word for story: a vision, a dream of the future, and to have that as a guide and support for us.

That part of the mind has a lot of benefit. The mind that has stories and ideas—it's the bundling, it's the way that they come with clinging, that is a problem. So it is possible to have stories without any clinging. But when the story-making mind, the mind that makes things up, clings to itself, clings to the stories, then it becomes a bundle. Then it becomes

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the bundle of mental constructs.

And the thing about these stories is that they contribute to the possibility—the stories that let us cling to the other ones. They kind of create the other bundles, in a sense, but they create their own bundle. Some people are so caught in their story. They have a single story that they live their whole life by: a story of resentment, or a story of victimhood, or a story of a dream, or a Pollyanna story, that everything is just wonderful and they do not really see through it.

There are many ways we get caught in and stuck in things that limit us. And the Buddha's teachings explicitly talk about how we limit ourselves, so that we can understand how we can free ourselves from the limitations of clinging, of attachments. We can free ourselves from these heavy bundles we carry sometimes for a lifetime, and see fresh, see in a new way. We can see in a way that allows something profound to begin coming alive inside of us, to our innate vitality, our innate kind of movement of life that gets sometimes curtailed by these difficult stories that we carry.

So a very important part of mindfulness, then, is to know how to be mindful of the thinking mind, the discursive mind, the storytelling mind. To be present for it with respect and love and care, but in such a way that we learn to see and feel that, and see it for what it is—to see it as something we are creating. And if it is useful to do so, if it is wonderful and a healthy form of joy and creativity, and it has value, we do not have to. But we want to learn in mindfulness how to put it down, how to let it go, how to come quieter than that.

So that we have much more say in the future, outside of meditation, about what we pick up and what we put down, what we see the value of staying with, and what we can let go and relax, step away from. And one of the key aspects of this in mindfulness practice is to recognize if there is any tension. Any kind of pain, any contraction, any headaches, any narrowing of attention, limiting of attention, that happens from this relationship to the story-making mind, the making-up mind. And that is extra.

Even appropriate, healthy, wonderful stories we can cling to and be attached to. We can be tricked into staying with them because the story itself is a good story, and a healthy one. But what is not healthy is how we hold it, how we relate to it. And we want to find even how to relate to good stories, healthy ones, in a healthy way. Do not cling to those. Do not get tight. Do not get preoccupied. Do not have a compulsivity or an obsessivity with those as well.

So mindfulness is a very powerful tool to free us from clinging. That's one of its primary tools and value purposes. And how we do that is to really stay present and feel the sensations of

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clinging until we see those sensations for what they are: that they are unnecessary to live by. And when we put down the clinging, a whole different source of life is possible, and it is inspiring. But you have to wait for that next week.

So we have one more bundle to talk about tomorrow. This is the one that maybe will excite some of you, or already confuse some of you, because usually in English the last bundle is called consciousness. And that is a bit of a problem to translate that way, and that we'll look at tomorrow. Thank you.

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