Dharmette: The Bundles (5 of 5) Cognition not Consciousness

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Hello, welcome to this fifth talk on the five bundles. Today, the fifth bundle is called *viññāṇa* in Pāli, and it is usually translated as the word consciousness. My proposal is that translating it as consciousness is unhelpful. It actually confuses what the Buddha taught and lends itself to all kinds of abstract, metaphysical, even transcendent ideas of what consciousness is: as an entity, as a thing, as something that is ultimate. It is not necessary to translate the word *viññāṇa* as consciousness.

It doesn't go along with how the Buddha discusses this word or the verb that is associated with it. The verb is usually translated into English as cognizing, and the verb should more likely be translated as cognition rather than consciousness. The word consciousness in English is so obscure in what it really means. Many people think they know, but when people dig into what consciousness is, there is so much disagreement, so many different theories and ideas, that it is probably safe to say we don't know what it is. After all, it has only been used in the English language for a couple of hundred years in the way that we use it in modern English. English speakers managed to get along quite well without this word for centuries.

So, I'm going to talk about this fifth bundle, but to do that, I want to review the four bundles before. The bundles are bundles of attachments we have clinging to; we hold on to things, and we collect them. We have big collections of them. The Buddha talks about five collections. The first is appearances, and the metaphor, the simile, for appearances is foam on top of a river.

Here, we have the analogy of a river as representing human life: the river of all the changing sensations and experiences. We are more change than solid as human beings. It is river-like, for the Buddha, as a metaphor. But what we do is, there is foam on top of the river, and the

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foam is very insubstantial and almost doesn't exist. You can put your hand through it and shape it in all kinds of ways.

The poor foam changes, and when the river goes over a waterfall, the foam just flies and scatters and maybe gets destroyed. It easily gets stuck in eddies. Boats go through it and divide it in half, and the foam is kind of a... But if we focus only on the foam and think the foam is who we are, or the foam is who other people are, we don't really see the depth and the fluidity and the beauty of human beings, which is found in the river-like qualities of who they are.

The big lesson for me in this regard, which I've talked about before, is when I was nineteen, I went to Morocco long ago, in 1973. I noticed, after being there for—I was there about two weeks, I think—that there was a kind of a place in my mind that felt more at ease, more free, more spacious. It was kind of strange to be walking around and feel this location in my mind. What is that? You know, it's nice to have. It wasn't dramatic, but it was recognizable.

At some point, I associated that with when I saw men, grown men, in Morocco. Most of them back then were wearing jellabas, kind of robes, striped robes. They were clothes that I had no association with. Whereas back in the United States and in Europe, I had a lot of associations with what people wear, what professions they were in, what activities they were most involved with, what political parties they were in, and all kinds of things that I recognized through how people appeared.

So I was focusing on how people appeared to me. How they appeared to me came along with other recognitions, like whether they were good or bad people, whether they were problematic or not, whether I liked them or not, or approved of them or not. Then there were sensations of pleasure and discomfort, depending on that recognition and what I saw. Then there were stories I made up about them, where I saw them through the filter of more complicated social stories and places in life. Then I thought that I was right, or, “This is how things are, and things are not going to be any different,” in a very kind of subconscious, unreflective way.

But in Morocco, I had no context for judging or understanding the men wearing robes, and so I didn't have all these extra layers that happen almost automatically, subconsciously, without even me knowing it. Because the appearances I focused on, that I built a whole universe on, weren't there. If I stayed in Morocco for a long time, maybe I would have had something like that. But it was really eye-opening how much extra I added on top, and Morocco just left these men be as they are.

So appearances are like foam. Sensations are like the momentary splash of drops of rain

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on top of the water that disappear as soon as they appear. As soon as the drop touches the water, it already disappears. So that's the world of sensations: momentary sensations from the different nerve endings we have that take in touch and hearing and smell and, you know, eyesight.

Then we have recognition. The simile the Buddha gives is a mirage, and the representative of that is a regular mirage that I see on my walks when I go hiking in the mountains here in the hills. Probably three times a year or something, I see either a stick, a long, thin, curvy stick, or a root that is just poking above the ground a little bit, long and curvy along the surface. The first thing I see is a snake. It is not a snake.

In the next moment, I see it is actually a piece of a tree, a root or a branch. My initial recognition is a mirage. It is not really what is there. This idea of... But it isn't that recognition... It isn't that all appearances are foam. It isn't that all things that we see are foam. It is not that all sensations—maybe sensations are more like drops.

It isn't that recognition is necessarily wrong or off, but it can be. Especially if the fourth bundle, the fourth activity of the mind—story-making and associations—comes along, and we're not just seeing something and recognizing it for what it is. We see it through the stories we build up around it. It is the stories we get attached to, the ideas we get attached to, the meanings we apply to it, that we attach to.

Those the Buddha called plantains, or used plantains as similes. A plantain tree has tightly, very tightly wound leaves that are so tight that it looks like a solid trunk of a tree. But you can peel these individual leaves away, and at the core of it, there is no core. It is empty, and you don't find anything. So this world of stories we live in—stories are important, but stories can be dangerous when we cling to them, and we can collect bundles of clinging stories.

Then we come to the fifth bundle, and the simile for that is a magic show. The magic show is that we have these momentary... It is like a magician who conjures up something so we see something that is not there. How this works is that we have moments, momentary moments of cognition: a very, very rudimentary, simple kind of recognition, kind of moments of taking in the experience, what is here.

Like, I see the curvy, thin branch on the road and on the trails, and it is a moment of seeing. The cognition is just seeing a curvy, narrow, thin, round object. It just—that's where it is. The mind then takes that shape, and that is the basic cognition: the most basic kind of momentary little taking in of the sensations and recognizing it. It cognizes it, or recognizes it, as a snake when it is not a snake.

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It might be a snake. There was once in Thailand where there was a big branch going across a dirt road, you know, big enough for a car to go through in the forest. There was a branch on the road, and that's what I saw. So I stepped on it, and that was a snake. So again, this recognition.

But the moments of cognition are just momentary. What the mind does is construct continuity. That's the magic show. So if I say, “Today is Friday,” there is no Friday. It is just a mental concept that human beings use to get along, to find our way, and to organize our social and work life. But the magic show is that we believe that there is a continuous thing called Friday.

All there is is moments of cognition and creations and stories that we make around that, which lends itself to there being something here that continues. There are two primary things that the Buddha pointed to in the magic show of cognition. One is the creation of the idea of something like a continuous consciousness, an entity, a thing, which is consciousness itself. It is kind of like the old movies: movie frames are just still shots, but the mind constructs continuity of movement because of how the mind is built. The mind constructs experience as much as it takes it in; it reconstructs it in there.

So this magic show is the reconstruction of things into continuous and solid entities and things. One of those is the idea of consciousness. In a sense, from the Buddhist point of view, it is just a magic show. It is an idea that has been kind of conjured up by the mind. What we have are these momentary cognitions.

The second thing that the magic show creates is a continuous self. It is very valuable to have the idea of Fridays. It is very valuable to have the idea of you and yourself and what is going on. But with that magic show of creating this entity self, you're doing the same thing that I did as a nineteen-year-old when I saw people and created selves for them based on their clothes and how they appeared to me, which I didn't do in Morocco. We do this for ourselves.

We create something, whereas the idea of self is a little bit closer to the idea of just a Friday, and almost as empty as Friday. But it is more like a river: a river that flows and moves and goes around things and just keeps flowing and flowing. We live our life sometimes as a person who goes down to the river, takes a bucket of water out, walks back into civilization, and says, “Look, here's the river. This is the river.” It is just a bucket of water that is no longer being a river, no longer free to flow.

So many times, the magic show that we create around self is something like that. It is just a bucket of water. To be liberated is to return to the river, the river of flow that eventually

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makes it to the ocean. So the focus here is on clinging, and the bundles are not meant to be the five things that a human being is. They are just the bundles we cling to.

It is an added fantasy, an added story, to say, “There is no self, but what we are are five bundles of things.” That's taking what the Buddha was freeing ourselves from and turning it into one more thing to get attached to. So I hope this week was interesting and meaningful, important to understand these teachings on the bundles, the aggregates. May it come alive for you in a way that is useful for you in your practice.

Next week, as a continuity of this week, I will do the teachings on the *seven factors of awakening*, which are the core positive corollary that comes when there is no clinging. It's the good news. So thank you very much.

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