

Wind Bell

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“The Five Skandhas”

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Once there was a man and his name was Shakyamuni. He woke up at some point and became very happy; he became very helpful to all other living beings. We are still practicing his Way. He talked a lot, to get his disciples interested in life. He wanted them to notice their lives.

I have said it before and will keep saying it over and over: the Buddha did not say that life as such is frustrating and painful. Many people think he did say that, but he didn't. Actually, his enlightened view was that life is incomparable, indescribable, beyond all human evaluation. Sometimes, he must have said, “Wow! Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful! It's wonderful not only for me but for everybody!” He tried to convey his enthusiasm for the awakened life to everyone. He taught that life is not necessarily painful; it is painful only under certain conditions. He called those conditions “craving and clinging,” and this is what I would like to bring to our attention today.

We don't usually mention this about Shakyamuni Buddha, but when he was seven days old, according to tradition, he lost his mother. Many of the great teachers, from many spiritual disciplines, have lost parents at an early age. The Buddha was a bright child; he didn't miss the fact that he had lost his mother. He noticed, even though she was quickly replaced with a loving aunt and he grew up in very pleasant circumstances. Partly, I think, because of that initial tragedy, the Buddha's father made every effort to shield him from contact with any kind of unpleasantness. I agree with that attitude. I think that children should be protected, as much as possible from unnecessary pain. They should be given as much love and nourishment and protection from difficulty as possible. In part, because that's nice to do anyway; also because they may then grow up to be strong and sensitive, and be able to see what Shakyamuni perceived when he grew up: Namely, that everybody grows old, gets sick, decays, suffers and dies. He noticed that.

He also notices that, even though everyone knows that they grow old, get sick, and dies...Guess what? They find the same process in others disgusting. Strange, isn't it? Shakyamuni also knew that everybody grows old, gets sick, and dies, and even he was disgusted with this process in others. However, he was also very ashamed of his disgust at a normal process that every person must undergo. So, having lost his mother, having been raised very well, being very sensitive and easily hurt by the facts of existence, not being a numb person, and recognizing and being ashamed of his own response to disease, decay, and death...he made a great renunciation. He left his usual social sphere and entered a very different one. There, he immersed himself in old age, sickness, and death; and in his shame at being disgusted by those characteristics in others.

Now, this story can be understood as a biography, and it can also be seen as a psychological metaphor: That we all have experienced a time of knowing the bliss of oneness and interconnectedness. And we lose it. It is an innocence, a radical innocence that we lose. We all lose it. When we realize our loss, when we realize that others lose it too, then we can begin to search for a way back to oneness.

At this point though, I must point out that the happiness that we experience when we are very young is not known to us. It is a joy too complete to recognize itself. Part of our necessary development, as human beings, is not only to have a great, loving, blissful heart; but also to know it, to be aware of it, to recognize it fully. When we first experience this happiness, it is a dark bliss, a dark unconscious happiness. Our full assignment in life, as human beings, is, through the suffering of separation, through the yearning for union, to find it again. The Buddha teaches that through illuminating the situation of this pain, this frustration, this loss, this broken heart from which everything begins -- we can become free.

I have often been impressed by the fact that the first truth of existence upon which the Buddha encouraged us to concentrate is not very attractive. Wouldn't it be more pleasant to meditate on the vastness of consciousness, or a golden buddha, or something equally appealing? Of course there are meditations on golden buddhas and they are perfectly good practices; but the first instructions of the historical Buddha were for us to look at something rather unattractive. Namely, the origins of frustration.

This reminds me of an old joke: One day two men were standing on a sidewalk, at night, looking down the gutter under a street light. A policeman came up to them and said, "What are you guys doing?" One of the men replied, "We're looking for his watch." "Oh, did you lose it here?", said the policeman. The other man answered, "No, I lost it up the street, but the light's better here."

We've lost our watches, and we usually like to look for them where there is already a nice bright light. For most of us, suffering and frustration exist in darkness, without nice lights, or beautiful golden auras, or nice songs, or beautiful people saying, "Come on! Look right here." Our watches are actually in the silent, intimidating dark places. We can scout around in some really nice locations in our psyches - but that may not be where our watch is, or our ... What is it that we lost? The happiness of being alive?

As I mentioned previously, the Buddha did not say that life as such is frustrating. Here is an approximate Sanskrit version of what Buddha said: *Upadana panca skandha dukkha*. *Upadana* means clinging. *Panca* means five. *Skandha* means aggregates; and *dukkha* means pain, frustration, dissatisfaction, uneasiness, or misery. So, clinging to the five aggregates - that's the definition of *dukkha*. Clinging to the five aggregates is really the only problem in life. If you don't cling to the five aggregates, life is just life.

There are five aggregates, and number one is called, in Sanskrit, *rupa*. *Rupa* means form. There are ten types of form: color, sound, smell, touch, and taste. These are the five sense fields. Then there are five sense capacities, sometimes called sense organs. They match the first five exactly: eye organ, ear organ, nose organ, tongue organ, and body organ. The organs are sensitive to and respond to the phenomena called sense fields. The eye organ is something located in a living being that responds to, or is affected by color. That's the first aggregate of any living being. All life is physically based; there are no living beings which do not respond to physicality.

The next aggregate is called *vedana*, feeling or sensation. There are basically just three kinds of sensation: feeling pain, feeling pleasure, and being confused about just what one is feeling. This evaluative function is present in every experience.

The third one is called conception, *samjñā*. Basically this is a process by which an image of an object of awareness is brought into contact with consciousness.

The next aggregate has many different kinds of elements in it. It's called the formations aggregate, or the composition aggregate, *samskara*. In here, you will find anger, confusion, lust, faith, concentration, diligence, shamelessness, shamefulness, fear of blame, lack of fear of blame...many, many possible psychological processes. Each of these processes has (and all of them collectively have) a tendency to condition the other *skandhas*. They have the tendency to condition or influence the form aggregate, the feeling aggregate, and the conception aggregate. Also, they condition, or modify, or "habitize", the fifth aggregate, which is called *vijñana*, the aggregate of consciousness, or awareness, or cognition.

Those are the five. All living beings are just those five aggregates. No living beings have any types of experience outside of these five types. A moment of life is composed of these five aggregates, these five sources. Our practice is to become familiar with these five groupings: with what they really are, how they happen, how they collaborate to conjure up this wonderful event called life.

Remember, Buddha didn't say that these five processes are frustrating and painful. These five are life. Frustration is clinging to these five things. Trying to cling to these five things is like trying to cling to five kids: five teenage kids, five three year olds, or five drunk football players. It's like trying to control five vital, constantly changing, dynamic entities. Trying to control them will be a frustrating experience. These five things are happening every moment - all five, with total creative energy, fully realizing themselves instantly; then they go away and instantaneously five more appear. You can't control them; it's ridiculous and yet we try. The basic problem in life is that we try to control something that nobody ever has the slightest chance of controlling. What we become, if we can just let the skandhas happen, is beyond "good" and "bad", beyond pain and pleasure ... we become what is called Life.

I was driving down the Green Gulch entrance road about five or ten years ago when Jerry Brown was still Governor, and I heard an interview with him on the radio. He said something like, "I'm just a ping pong ball on the top of a fountain." Can you picture a fountain going up with a ping pong ball bouncing around on top if it? I thought to myself "That's pretty good! It's a good example of what Buddha taught as self clinging." What the Governor was describing is very close to our definition of suffering. The ping pong ball is extra; it's an illusion. Life is actually just a fountain. There is no ping pong ball on top. If you take a snapshot of the top of the fountain, just the globe of water forming the top surface ... that's a moment of life. There's no ping pong ball on top, no "self" in addition to the flow of the five *skandhas*.

We try to grab hold of the fountain. You can't. You can disturb it, but if you try to grasp it, to hold on to it, you are going to be frustrated. What I mean by the ping pong ball is the action of trying to control the fountain; it is a complete waste of time. This attempt is like some of the water trying to gain control of the entire fountain.

Human beings keep trying; they have the audacity, the imaginative power to dream of controlling something that is beyond control. This is the fundamental definition of suffering, and, basically, the only problem in life. *Upadana panca skandha dukkham*. We don't say that the fountain is a problem. It's trying to grasp and control the fountain that brings about problems. Human beings are not good at controlling themselves or their experiences. Suffering is the name for how bad we are at controlling life.

The problem doesn't stop there, it gets worse. Since we keep trying to control ourselves, we also try to control others, who are beyond our control. I've tried for many years to control Zen students, in groups of one and up. I can't control one, I can't control three. They resist control. I gave up some years ago. There are some things though, that we are all good at. We are fairly proficient at "ordering". Ordering is not the same as control. For example, clean your desk. That's not a controlling act. While you are trying to get the desk cleared, the telephone may ring, your children may come and climb on you, a lamp may fall on you, you may forget, in the middle of the clearing away, what you wanted to do in the first place - these things may happen. Those are matters of control. But, if you want to clean off your desk, some day you may be able to accomplish it. Then you can take a book, or even a piece of paper, and put it on your desk. On the book or piece of paper might be the words, *upadana panca skandha dukkha*. Just look at it. What's your life about?

I put quite a bit of effort into order and try to put almost no effort into control. If I put a lot of effort into ordering, I realize even more deeply what a waste of time control is. For example, every morning I sit in this seat and I simply try to sit still. I don't try to control myself into sitting still, I try to sit still as an ordering activity. I can't actually control myself into sitting still - I can not sit still. The only way that I can sit still is if everybody in the universe makes me sit still. All of us together are perfectly in control of me. What I am is actually what everything has made. In that sense, each of us is under control; the entire cosmos is controlling us, but individually we cannot control anything.

The more I sit, the more deeply I realize that I can never sit still. Also, I realize ever more deeply that I always have been sitting still, in the sense of all living beings making me sit still at every moment. Every moment I am completely still; but the kind of stillness that I try to achieve, I can never accomplish. By ordering my life I realize that control is wasted effort. Ordering also facilitates, supports, my realization of what I am good at: I'm good at being me. Moment by moment, I am like a fountain. I am a moment of spontaneous creativity. I am not in control of this creativity, but I am its site - pure, universally connected creativity. Each one of us is such a site. Each one of us is a fountain of the universe. Each one of us is a place where the universe is expressing itself as a living location. If I order my life, I can see the fountain; not see it so much as be it (because there is no "person" here looking at the fountain). Just being a fountain, there is just the life of the fountain, there is just Life. No one watches life, life includes the "observers".

I want to give you an example of how to study one of those *skandhas*. Let's take the form aggregate. What we find here is a psycho-physical process. Buddhas wake up in the midst of a psycho-physical process. Another way of saying it is that Buddhas wake up in the midst of delusion. Illusions are conjured up by psycho-physical processes. We live in illusions; we wake up in the middle of that process of illusion. We don't wake up in the middle of enlightenment, or in the middle of empty space. What we wake up about, and in, and through, is in delusion. That's the way we wake up; that's our home; that's our food. The five *skandhas*, the five aggregates, that is where we wake up.

For example, Buddha says, "Why do we say 'body'?" One is affected, therefore we say 'body'. That is what he means by 'body'. Body is not a thing. Once I said, "Body is that which is affected." Someone pointed out that this is not a good way of phrasing it. It is not as though there was a thing which is affected; here is a body with arms, legs and torso which is affected; I move it around in time and space.

This is not what the Buddha meant by “body”. This is not a living body. There is such an experience, but it’s not a bodily experience. It is conceptual experience.

Often we regard a concept as our bodies. We run up and down hills, swim in the ocean, and so forth, and what they are really doing is taking our concepts, putting them in situations and working the concepts.

The more we work with the concept of the body, the more hungry we become for physical experience. We’re starving; not because we aren’t having experiences, but because we are not aware of our physical experiences.

So, the problem lies in the confusion between conceptual experience of the body and actual bodily experience. In fact, arms and legs are concepts; they are not physical entities. Objectively, physicality is a composition of the four great elements. Subjectively physicality is “being affected.” The body is actually a location where one is affected.

How? Being affected by colors, sounds, smells and flavors. Being affected by heat, being affected by cold, being affected by pressure, hard and soft, rough and smooth...This is the body. To discover the body, begin by trying to find a physical experience which is actually physical, not just conceptual. Second, notice the conceptual experience of the body; and third, make an effort to clearly distinguish between the two.

Can you imagine living in the world on the basis of how you are affected physically, rather than negotiating concepts like “arms” and “legs” through space and time? Can you imagine shifting your orientation so that you’re living from how you are affected?

When it’s time to move I may be afraid to let go of body concepts. I may think, “How will I get down the stairs?” “How will I get food into my mouth?” Don’t worry, all of these body concepts will still come up. Concepts of spoon, hand, oatmeal, mouth, distance from mouth to spoon, will still occur. So I will still be able to eat and walk and so on. But we shift over to find out what it is like to live with our whole body?

This shift is supported by ordering our life. For example, deciding that for the next ten minutes I am going to just sit here; or, for the next ten minutes I am going to walk very slowly, not doing anything fancy. I am going to be in a situation where I will feel safe, and I am going to try to understand what Buddha means when he says that the body is “being affected”. In that way we order our lives so that we can make time and a space for studying each of these *skandhas*. We can spend five or ten minutes asking ourselves, “What kinds of feelings are happening? Am I having a pleasurable feeling? A painful feeling? We need to order our lives so that we can actually examine the elements of our experience. Being “Buddha” is being greatly awakened in the midst of delusion, being awake in the dance of these Five processes. Here is an example of what it is like to look; this is an example of a little awakening:

My daughter had a friend staying over one night. When her friend’s mother came, she went and sat on her lap. My daughter felt that her friend was intentionally excluding her by expressing love and affection for her mother. After her friend had left, my daughter went to her own mom and told her how she felt excluded by her friend. Then she climbed up on my lap, at which her mother said, “Are you intentionally

trying to exclude me?” She replied, “No, I’m just hugging my Dad.” My daughter then realized that being affectionate to a mom or dad is not necessarily others from one’s affections. So, she said, “Okay, I’ll give her another chance. I’ll give her one more day. I’ll watch her. “

At school the next day, she watched her friend throughout the day. Returning home, she said, “I noticed that I was getting angry at her because of the way I was thinking. The way I was thinking about her made me angry.”

This is an example of a little insight, a little awakening that can happen when you turn around and look at your feelings, conceptions, and so on; look at how they work, what they do. Even a child can do it, but you have to order your life with some intention like, “ Okay, I’ll give her another chance. I’ll look tomorrow.” That’s an ordering attitude.

We can order our lives to look at ourselves. We can learn that whenever we’re frustrated, it comes from trying to cling to the ungraspable, uncontrollable activity of our lives. If we are just spontaneous, uncontrollable activity, there’s no frustration. Then we will not try to control other living creatures, and we will not cause them harm.

This is Shakyamuni Buddha’s ancient teaching on how to just be here. From here we can move forward to benefit all living beings.

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