Emptiness: A Practical Course for Meditators

Lesson 2 Reading: Introduction, Chapters 3 & 4
3. WHAT IS REAL?

The world is in you, not you in the world.
—Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

THE SENSE OF “I” is the foundation of nearly all of our thoughts and actions. We base our whole lives around the sense of “I,” but as we’re beginning to see, this sense may not be as reliable as we’ve taken it to be. If it is, in some ways, an illusion, where should we look for what is real?

The Buddha taught in order to ease the suffering of sentient beings, so how did he see a “sentient being”? We get the sense from many of his discourses that he did not see a “person” but a collection of elements.

The Visuddhimagga, or Path of Purification, is a fifth-century Sri Lankan text in Pali by Buddhaghosa Bhikkhu that collected many meditation techniques known at the time. In it the author says that an experienced butcher carving up the carcass of a cow would not call the parts “cow, cow, cow.” The butcher would say, in today’s words, “sirloin, tenderloin, rump.” In the same way, Buddhaghosa says, for one who has thoroughly examined one’s mind-body process, it would not occur to him or her to say “person, person, person.” Rather the well-taught disciple would see the detailed components that make up a person. The Buddha generally described these parts as either the six sense bases or the five aggregates.
In this chapter we will explore both these schemata. As we learn to see the way the Buddha did, it can be transformative, because this seeing takes place without the veil of self.

**THE SIX INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SENSE BASES**

In a teaching called the *Discourse on Totality*, the Buddha gave a pithy statement of what he considered to be real.

Listen, monks, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality [of things]. What is the totality? It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. If anyone were to proclaim a totality beyond this, that person would be speaking of something outside their knowledge.2

“I will teach you the totality of things.” This is a bold statement. Yet the Buddha was confident in saying this 2,500 years ago. What are real are the six sense organs and their associated objects. In the Buddha’s view, mind is the sixth sense; objects of this sense are primarily thoughts and emotions. The beauty of this statement is that it is very simple and at the same time clearly true. This simplicity strikes the opening bell for Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and meditation.

The discourse reveals a fundamental perspective that underlies the Buddha’s teachings. The domain of these teachings is the immediate experience of a human being. Why? Because it is in the field of one’s direct experience that suffering is born, and it is in the field of one’s direct experience that suffering is ended. This was the Buddha’s sole interest: “Both formerly and now, I teach only suffering and the cessation of suffering.”3

When we look with a fresh eye, we see that our immediate experience is of the six sense organs and objects. The six senses describe a comprehensive field that includes all of our ordinary experience. This is the field that the Buddha is concerned with. In truth there is one other element not apparent in our ordinary experience that transcends the six senses: nibbāna. We will examine that element later.
THE SENSE ORGANS AND OBJECTS

Focusing on the way we apperceive the world through the sense bases (Pali: *āyatana*) offers a clear basis for discerning what is directly knowable, and thus “real,” namely the sense organs and their objects. The organs are often called the “internal sense bases” or “sense doors,” and the objects are known as the “external sense bases” or “sense objects.” The language of internal and external is used in Buddhist texts even though some of the “external” objects, like sensations and thoughts, seem to be “inside.” Even in the light of emptiness, we don’t have to question the basic fact of the functioning of these sense bases.

In our experience, we mostly pay attention to the sense objects. This is especially true for meditators, who may have given many hours of attention to sounds, sensations, thoughts, emotions, and so on. It is the objects that seem to give us pleasure or pain and through which we seem to suffer loss. We seldom pay attention to the sense organs until they become uncomfortable (red eye, blocked ear, dry tongue).

Why are the sense organs in this passage from the Buddha’s *Discourse on Totality* given the same importance as the objects? Why didn’t he just describe our experience in terms of the sense objects? The answer is that sense objects don’t appear without sense organs. The objects in our experience arise in dependence upon the organs, which are part of the body. The Buddha is emphasizing that without the body, there would be no human experience. This is a key point in his teaching of dependent origination, which we will discuss later.

USING THE SENSE BASES IN MEDITATION

The second power of the schema of the sense bases is that it offers a reliable guide for our meditation practice. Meditation is about coming to understand things the way they are, not the way we imagine them to be or would like them to be. What things appear that are to be understood? The sense doors and objects. So where should we focus our attention in meditation? On the sense doors and objects. In meditation we are not going to concoct elaborate theories about the beginning of the universe or the inherent flaws of social classes or the supposed divide between id and ego. We will simply pay attention to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, thoughts, and emotions as the way to stay most closely in touch with reality.
A key point in meditation then is to move our attention out of the conceptual acrobatics and fantastic proliferations of thoughts, and into what is real. This reminds us of the advice from the Gestalt psychologist Fritz Perls to “lose your mind and come to your senses.” The Buddha does not ask us to lose our thinking mind altogether, because thoughts are essential for living in the world and for Dharma reflection, but we are encouraged to drop the unnecessary proliferations. When we do turn our meditative attention to the realm of thinking, it will be primarily to see each thought as an object arising in the present moment, persisting for a brief time, and then passing away. We are more interested in the process of a thought’s arising and passing than in its content, which is often born of multiple associations far removed from the reality of the senses. In meditation, thought becomes just another sense object to be noticed, not engaged with.

SEEING THE NATURE OF WHAT IS

The third powerful effect of this schema is that we start to see the actual nature of things. This perception has long been obscured by our misguided ideas about reality. Now we see how changeable reality is. Every time we feel a breath, we notice that it has a beginning and an end. Every sound we hear starts and stops. Every sensation we feel changes under our gaze. Every thought that arises also passes away. In fact as we observe sense objects again and again, we find that not a single one lasts. Sometimes an emotion may last for hours or in rare cases for days, but eventually it changes or fades away. Even a persistent emotion like grief or depression goes through many variations in intensity in a day’s time. The body may look similar from one day to the next, but it may have gained weight, sprouted facial hair, or reacted to an insect bite. Everything is changing. This truth of impermanence is a cornerstone of the Buddha’s teaching. We suffer because we try to hold on to things that don’t last.

Seeing change directly is an important perception, because concepts lead us into assumptions of continuity and permanence. We say “my body” and imagine it as an unchanging possession, or “my husband” and believe that he is the same person today as he was twenty years ago. We think “my house,” but it’s not constant: toilets start to leak and termites chew into the beams. The concept
seems to promise an ongoing stable entity, but when we look closely, that entity is changing all the time. When we move from dwelling in static concepts to seeing the actual nature of what is, the truth of impermanence starts to sink in.

Understanding impermanence is a good example of the three avenues of learning we discussed in the introduction. You have probably heard about impermanence (learning by hearing) and may have thought about it (learning by reflection). But it is only when you witness change in your sense experiences over and over with a quiet, attentive mind (learning by meditative insight) that the truth of impermanence will penetrate and transform your habits of mind. We need this third kind of understanding to help us let go of our many attachments.

FINDING THE SOURCE OF SUFFERING

Fourth, the sense bases offer excellent direction on where to look for the genesis of suffering. As the building blocks of human experience, the sense bases are the places where craving fastens on, leading us into clinging and then suffering. Training ourselves to pay close attention to the sense bases, over and over, increases the likelihood we’ll see how suffering is created and how it can be released.

THE FIVE AGGREGATES

The five aggregates (Pali: khandha) are another teaching model the Buddha employed to describe the reality of our human experience and the location of suffering. The sense bases and the aggregates cover the same territory of reality, but they divide it up in different ways.

The English term aggregate sounds rather technical—it makes me think of road-paving material—whereas khandha, a common word in ancient India, means “heap” or “bundle.” Perhaps the closest rendering would be “the five kinds of stuff” that comprise us. However, aggregate is the term used most often to translate khandha, so I will use it here. This way of dissecting reality, unfamiliar to modern ways of thinking, requires some explanation. Let us look in turn at each aggregate and its meaning.
MATERIAL FORM

The first aggregate is material form (Pali: rūpa). Sometimes abbreviated as “form,” rūpa refers to all matter, both internal and external. When we meditate, the term form is sometimes taken as synonymous with the body, because the body is such an important object in meditation practice. When used in this way, form includes the five physical sense organs. But the meaning of rūpa is much wider than this.

Rūpa also includes the entire universe of matter beyond the body, as well as sense impressions that arise within the world of matter, that is, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations. Hence, the aggregate of material form designates the body, the five physical sense organs and their objects, and the rest of the physical world.

The first five internal and external sense bases are all included within the aggregate of material form. But because sight is such a dominant physical sense, “form” is often associated specifically with seeing, and it is sometimes used in this context to mean “visible objects.” In its widest meaning, the first aggregate, form, includes all matter and all physical sense impressions. So you might deduce that the other four aggregates have to do with mind, and that is correct.

FEELING

The second aggregate is feeling (Pali: vedanā). This specialized Buddhist term does not mean a feeling in the sense of an emotion. A better translation might be “feeling tone.” It means the quality in each moment of sense contact as it is experienced in one of three ways: as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. (This last feeling tone may be called “neutral.”)

Based on the pleasant and unpleasant aspects of sense experience, we form likes and dislikes. These then become the ground for painful reactive emotions like greed, hatred, and fear. Based on the neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant aspect of experience, we form our “overlooks,” the tendency to not even see people or things or events that don’t excite our passions. Tuning out these things means that we are not paying attention to neutral parts of our experience, even though they are just as real as the pleasant and unpleasant. This is delusion at work.

I have seen the aggregate of vedanā explained by some Buddhist teachers as
meaning physical sensations, but it’s clear from the texts that \textit{vedanā} applies to all six senses, not just the sense of touch. It’s also sometimes described as meaning emotions, but the texts are clear that \textit{vedanā} comes in only three flavors (pleasant, unpleasant, neither), not the myriad flavors of the emotions.

It’s interesting that the feeling tone is introduced as a mental component. We might assume that the feeling tone of a sense contact is inherent in the object. When we hear a pretty tune, it’s natural to think that the pleasantness is an integral part of the tune, and that everyone would experience it in that same pleasant way. But when we observe the wide range of human tastes, we see that it’s not always like this.

A convenience store in Southern California was having a problem with drug dealers in its parking lot. The presence of the dealers and their customers was keeping away paying customers. The store manager would call the police who would ask the group to leave, but soon they would come back. Then the store manager had an idea: why not play some music over the store’s outdoor loudspeakers? He started playing tracks by Mantovani, a conductor who used the sound of swelling strings to dramatize movie scores in the 1950s and 1960s. My mother was fond of Mantovani, so I heard a lot of it growing up. To her the sound was very pleasant. However, the drug dealers did not find it at all pleasant and they cleared out.

Feeling tone is an individual response to each sense contact based at least partly on our own background, tastes, and conditioning. The contact can be either physical or mental. That is, we feel pleasure, pain, and neutrality in both the physical realm of the five senses and the mental realm of thoughts and emotions. We develop likes and dislikes, hopes and fears, through all six senses. One teacher described feeling tone almost as a verb, saying that we “feel into” a contact to define it as either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither.

I will mostly use “feeling tone” as the translation of \textit{vedanā}, although I’ll use “feeling” when the context makes clear that we are talking about the aggregate and not a synonym for emotion.

**PERCEPTION**

The third aggregate is perception (Pali: \textit{saññā}), which in Buddhism means the activity of mind that recognizes an object. In the ever-changing stream of sense
impressions that make up our experience, we are constantly singling some things out and naming them: “chair, tree, sweater, house, Mary.” Naming is an act of recognition that places the object into a category we are already familiar with. Even if we don’t say the word, the recognition process is still going on. Perception helps us to make sense of the myriad sense experiences by associating them with what is already known, by re-cognizing them.

The mind names objects so quickly and automatically that we may think that naming is built in to the sense contact. But that is not the case. Oliver Sacks, the neurologist and author, tells the story of a man named Virgil who had become blind when quite young and then as an adult had surgery to restore his sight. When the bandages were removed from his eyes, everyone expected him to exclaim with delight on being able to see again—but:

He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing, at the surgeon, who stood before him. Only when the surgeon spoke—saying “Well?”—did a look of recognition cross Virgil’s face. Virgil told me later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blue came a voice that said, “Well?” Then, and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face—and, indeed, the face of his surgeon.4

If we look freshly at our own visual field, perhaps with one eye closed, we might see that it is at root the same undifferentiated mass of form and color and movement that Virgil saw. But we have learned to interpret all those blotches with no apparent effort. Virgil, blind almost since infancy, had not. His eye organ had been repaired but his faculty of perception had not yet developed.

Perception is not always accurate. One fall day I was doing walking meditation outside at a retreat center when I heard the distinct sounds of drums and bugles coming closer. “A marching band,” I thought, “coming up the street toward us.” I stopped to listen more closely because it’s not every day a marching band comes up the street. Slowly the drums and horns turned into the rattles and squeaks of a garden cart on two bicycle tires making its bumpy way along a gravel path.
a hundred feet away. The sounds had been heard clearly, but the perception—a categorizing that is inherently an interpretation—was faulty. This incident was just funny, but some misperceptions lead to real suffering, as when we perceive something dear to us to be lasting when it is not.

This definition of perception is different from its common usage in English. Merriam-Webster defines perceive as “to become aware of through the senses,” and offers consciousness as a synonym for perception. The common understanding in English is that perception means the bare sense impressions that make up our experience, such as the visual object described as “form” above. However, in Buddhism, the bare sense datum is called a sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or mind object. Perception refers to the act of conceptualization—naming and categorizing an object.

**Volitional Formations**

The fourth aggregate is called volitional formations (Pali: *sankhāra*). Sometimes we might just say “formations” if it is clear that we are talking about the fourth aggregate. There are three categories of volitional formations: mental, verbal (actions of speech), and bodily (physical actions). In a period of sitting meditation the most persistent of these categories is usually the mental. Here, mental volitional formations include all our thoughts; the wide range of our moods and emotions like happiness, fear, joy, desire, and so on; and subtle meditative states such as mindfulness, concentration, tranquility, compassion, and equanimity. What we commonly refer to as someone’s “personality” is just the day-to-day manifestation in their life of the variety and balance among their volitional formations.

These formations are called “volitional” because they express our will or motivation in some way. A thought of desire expresses the will to have what is wanted, while a thought of generosity expresses the wish to help another. The refined meditative states do not come about by accident but only by deliberate, willed cultivation. Once activated, these volitions are more likely to arise again in future.

Just as the form aggregate covers a vast range of physical phenomena, so this aggregate covers a vast range of mental experience: love, cruelty, confusion, joy, tranquility, and so on. All the kinds of happiness we can imagine in the term
“heavenly” are included in volitional formations, as are the intense miseries we ascribe to “hellish.” The creative thoughts of Einstein and the murderous thoughts of Stalin are here. So also are Jesus’s love and the wisdom of the Buddha.

**Consciousness**

The fifth aggregate is consciousness (Pali: *viññāṇa*). Consciousness may mean many different things in Western philosophy and psychology, but in Buddhism it is quite straightforward. It means the knowing quality of mind, that which receives or holds the impressions at the six sense doors. Consciousness is the most basic *knowing* of an object, before any words and before perception. Perception can act only after consciousness has revealed an appearance which can then be named. Every moment of sense experience has the element of consciousness within it. This is what it means to be a sentient being!

It can take some time in our practice to recognize the activity of consciousness. In paying attention to the breath, for example, we have mostly been advised to focus on the physical sensations arising with an in-breath or an out-breath. We have seldom been instructed to notice the process of consciousness that is also taking place. At first when we feel the breath we may feel that there is only a physical process taking place. But if we reflect, we realize that there is a mental component of the experience as well.

After the breath has disappeared, we can remember what it felt like. If there had not been a mental knowing of the experience of breath, we could not have formed a memory of it to store in the mind. We might also reflect that when we are asleep, the body still breathes but there is no conscious knowing of the experience. When we are awake, we consciously know of the breath if we attend to it. This knowing is mental. In time we can start to feel the mental activity of consciousness—knowing—as it is happening.

**Five Aggregates—or Three?**

These are the five aggregates the Buddha taught: material form, feeling tone, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. Truth to tell, it is something of a strange list. It has none of the familiarity we experience in hearing about the six senses. Certainly matter, emotions, and consciousness are fundamental kinds of stuff, but what about feeling tone and perception? They are significant factors
of mind, but why have they been singled out for such important treatment? Why were they not just included in the volitional formations aggregate? They are simply two more mental factors. Then we would have just three aggregates: material form, mental formations, and consciousness. This is a list we might relate to more easily: our experience is made up of the body with its sense impressions, mental states, and the knowing faculty.

In fact listing only three aggregates is the way reality is organized in the Abhidhamma, a section of the Pali Canon that is considered a technical manual of Buddhist psychology. Because of its respected standing in the Buddhist tradition, I will sometimes speak of the three components, or aggregates, as a simpler model that covers the same ground.

The six senses and the five aggregates encompass the entire range of our sense experience. The six senses are well suited for understanding the truth of impermanence and therefore learning not to cling. The five aggregates also play an important role in insight; their strength is in learning not to identify with things as being “I” or “mine.”
MEDITATION

Mindfulness of Sounds

We will continue to investigate the sense bases and aggregates through meditation. Sounds are a frequent part of our experience, appearing as objects of our ear organ in the six sense bases and as an aspect of form in the first aggregate. Mindfulness of sounds can be a useful way to bring a spacious quality into our meditation.

- Begin with mindfulness of breathing. Once you have connected well with the breath, shift your attention to hear all the sounds that are coming and going in your environment. There may be the sounds of nature, such as wind or birdcalls, or sounds in your home, like a fridge or dryer, or the sounds of cars and traffic outside.
- Let your attention widen to hear all the sounds around you in a 360-degree, panoramic fashion. Notice that you don’t have to strain to hear sounds. If you just relax as you sit, all the sounds are heard spontaneously. Just stay receptive and you will know all the sounds.

Mindfulness of Feeling Tone

Feeling tone is the second aggregate and is included under mind objects in the sense bases. It’s an interesting phenomenon because it forms the basis for our likes and dislikes.

- Begin with mindfulness of breathing. Then whenever a sensation in the body or a sound draws your attention, let that new object become the focus for your meditation. When you feel a breath or a sensation, or hear a sound, notice whether that contact feels pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is its feeling tone.
- Once you have noticed the feeling tone, you can let the atten-
tion go back to noticing breath, sensations, or sounds. Every time your attention lands on one of these objects, first notice the object and then notice its feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Continue to notice these pairs: a sense object and its corresponding feeling tone. The latter is mindfulness of feeling tone.
FROM OUR OWN innate tendencies and the repeated use of language, we have adopted—without reservation—the belief that the body, thoughts, and feelings are “me,” and that everything outside the body is “not me.” This fundamental sense of duality creates a split in our experience that leads us to feel disconnected from the rest of creation, with the consequent feelings of loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and longing. We are examining the belief in a self in order to see through this duality, because beyond it is the promise of much greater wholeness and connection. To see fully the emptiness of self, we need to look into all the corners of our being—because the sense of self is very good at appearing to be reformed while merely finding subtler places to take a new birth. The Buddha often used the five aggregates as the model to offer a thorough analysis of the myriad ways we identify as self as well as the way out of identification.

In the last chapter we saw that the five aggregates correspond to the totality of a person’s sense experience. Please note that there is a common word that is not among the five aggregates: “me.” There is no entity at the center that owns them or stands apart from them or to whom the aggregates are happening. If the

4. THE FIVE AGGREGATES ARE NOT SELF

When you do not think yourself to be this or that, all conflict ceases.
—Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

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In the last chapter we saw that the five aggregates correspond to the totality of a person’s sense experience. Please note that there is a common word that is not among the five aggregates: “me.” There is no entity at the center that owns them or stands apart from them or to whom the aggregates are happening. If the
aggregates cover everything that is real, then what appears is only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. We don’t see “I” anywhere, and we don’t need to add it.

In conventional language we apply the term “I” to a partial collection of the aggregates: the body and the four mental aggregates. The rest of the material world is regarded as “other.” But even within this conventional designation of a self, there is not any single thing that we can put our finger on and say, “Here is the ‘I.’” What we call a being or a self is just a collection of parts—aggregates—put together in a certain way for a moment. There is no ongoing entity that is the center, or essence, of the collection.

The classical analogy used for this situation is that of a chariot, which is made up of a cart, wheels, axle, yoke, and reins. The chariot functions as a unit, but when considered closely, it is only a collection of parts assembled in a particular way. If you took the chariot apart and laid the parts on the ground, would you still call it a chariot? I don’t think so. There is no one thing called “chariot” beyond this assembled collection of parts. But chariot is a useful word, a useful concept, and sometimes a useful contraption.

So it is with the word I. It is a useful term, but it doesn’t point to any actual entity. The conventional “I” is just a collection of parts: body, mental factors, and consciousness. We lay claim to the individual aggregates or to the whole collection as “I” or “mine,” but there is no evidence for this claim.

THE AGGREGATES AS NATURE

The way we identify with the aggregates is experienced differently for each aggregate. In this section, we will explore some of the common ways that identification happens and in each case why that identification doesn’t exactly make sense. We will see that, far from being personal, each aggregate is merely an aspect of nature. In this section, I’ll use the simpler schema of three aggregates: body, emotions, and consciousness.

THE BODY

Each aggregate is a conditioned thing that follows its own laws. Take the body for example. We call it “me,” but it is just a phenomenon of physical nature. It
has had its own life quite apart from our conscious volition. It formed years ago as a single cell from the union of our father’s sperm and our mother’s egg. That cell divided, then those cells multiplied and specialized for nine months in the womb. Since emerging into the wider physical world, the body has been nourished by milk and food, water and air, and it has grown bigger, stronger, and older. And here we find it today, shaped and colored the way it has been by our genes and other natural forces—and we lay claim to it as self.

We may feel a lot of pride in our body if others consider it attractive, or we may feel shame if they don’t. We may wish that the body were taller or shorter, darker or fairer, lighter-boned or broader in the shoulders. But none of that was ever up to us. “I” didn’t even get a vote. The body was birthed and lives its own physical life according to its own physical laws. The basic body we have was never under our control. Of course its appearance has been influenced by our choices in diet, exercise, and health care, but these variations are minor compared to what we were given.

I had the good fortune to practice as a monk for some time in the monastery of Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the great forest masters of the last century in Thailand. Living close to nature was integral to the way he learned and taught. He put it this way: “This body came out of nature, is part of nature, never departed from nature, and belongs to nature. So give it back to nature. That will be a big relief for you.”

It is truly a great relief to let go of the belief that “I” am responsible for how this body looks. We see that the body has been created out of countless causes and conditions that were never within our control. Feelings of pride or shame about the body are based in the unconscious assumption that we should be able to control the body’s appearance.

Emotions

Emotions, a subset of volitional formations, can be equally sticky as a source of “I.” When we start to become mindful of emotions, we can see how we react to the different emotions that visit us. We want to feel happy, strong, confident, and joyful, so when these emotions come, we usually feel good about ourselves, as though “I” made this emotion happen. We don’t want to feel fearful, confused, anxious, or depressed, so when these emotions come, we usually feel bad about
ourselves, as though “I” made this happen. But is our emotional life really under our control? Do “I” make these emotions come and go?

Not really. Emotions, like the body, are the outcome of countless causes and conditions, including our culture, upbringing, traumas, successes, failures, health, past mind states, and recent events. Each of these experiences has conditioned our emotions in specific ways. When a mind state arises in the present, there is no agent called “I” who out of free choice has willed it to come, nor is there an “I” who can always choose to make it either last or go away. We find ourselves unable to control the presence or absence of most of our emotions.

Like the body, emotions follow their own laws and their own nature. Just as the body is an integral part of physical nature, we could say that emotions are simply a part of human nature or, more precisely, mental nature. Until enlightenment, all human beings have in their makeup the same wide range of emotions: happiness and unhappiness, joy and sorrow, hope and fear, and so on. All these are part of our mental nature, just as eyes and ears, or stomach and liver, are part of our physical nature. Trying not to feel some of these emotions when they are present makes as much sense as trying to take one’s eyes out.

Emotions are not generally under our control, and so they cannot be considered as a self. Yet they often play the most central role in who we take our self to be. We think, I’m a happy person or an angry person or a kind person or a fearful person. We often have strong feelings about who we take ourselves to be emotionally, but this type of self-description can be very constricting. We become hurt when others see us more critically than we see ourselves, or glad when they see us in a more flattering light. Of course no one feels the same way all the time. If I hold to a fixed view that “I am a kind person,” then when anger arises, I might not be able to accept it as an authentic feeling.

As we observe emotions over many hours of mindful attention, we see that all our moods just come and go. They don’t usually last very long. One arises, influences us, and passes away. Then the next arises and passes, and the next, and so on. We can’t hold on to the pleasant ones, because they are impermanent. We don’t need to coax the painful ones to go away, because they too are impermanent. Emotions are like the weather; sometimes it’s sunny and sometimes cloudy, wildly variable and out of our control. We could get caught up and spun around with each one, but it isn’t necessary that we do so. If we stop resisting or trying to
control them and simply be with each one with balance as it expresses itself, we are far less likely to be disturbed by their presence or absence.

When we understand emotions as part of nature and see their impermanence clearly, we can no longer claim them as who we really are. All humans have them, and none of them lasts for long. To say “I am a happy person” is like saying “California is sunny.” This is true—except when it’s not. Nature is always changing. The mind and emotions are constantly in flux. The mind, in fact, changes even more quickly than the body does.²

**CONSCIOUSNESS**

We often identify our sense of “I” with consciousness. When we see, we think, “I am seeing.” When we hear, we think, “I am hearing.” The sense of “I” as the observer—“I am seeing”—can be the most compelling entity of all to identify with. In fact there is no separate “self” having the experience of seeing or hearing. The aggregate of consciousness is simply receiving a sense impression. Consciousness sees. Consciousness hears. When we add “I,” we introduce an unnecessary element that doesn’t refer to anything that actually exists. Of course it’s fine to say “I am hearing” as a convention, to contrast with another person who is speaking, but we don’t need to add the word “I” when talking to ourselves about the experience of hearing or seeing.

Consciousness is also nature. The body is a part of physical nature and moods are part of mental nature. We identify with both body and moods, and we’re concerned with how others see us in these areas. We take these two aggregates personally. They represent the core of our personality, and we build our self-image around them. We think they are what makes us unique. Consciousness as viññāṇa, the bare knowing of a sense object prior to naming or labeling, is another aspect of mental nature, but unlike the body and moods, we don’t take consciousness personally. When we understand this function of mind, there is no reason to suppose that our consciousness is any different from anyone else’s. It’s not as though I have a really great viññāṇa and yours is quite puny. Consciousness as viññāṇa seems to be the same in all of us. When we examined the assumptions implicit in the idea of self, we saw that my self should be unique, different from anyone else’s. The contents of consciousness may be different from
one person to the next, but consciousness itself is not. Consciousness fails this test, and so it is not suitable to be considered my self.

**SEEING WITH WISDOM**

In many discourses the Buddha suggests to his disciples not to claim the five aggregates as self or as belonging to self. Here is a representative teaching, one that occurs in a few discourses. The Buddha is addressing a group of practitioners. (Scholars say that bhikkhu, which usually means “monk,” in this context refers to any serious practitioner, lay or monastic.)

“Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?”

“Suffering, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self’?”

“No, venerable sir.”

This sequence is then repeated for the other four aggregates of feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness, so that the disciples are led to see the totality of their sense experience as not-self.

We need to explain the use of the words *suffering* and *happiness* in this discourse. *Suffering* is the translation of the Pali word dukkha, a significant term in the Buddha’s teachings that actually has a broader range of meaning than simply “suffering.” It covers the whole spectrum of what we might call the unfortunate aspects of living, which can range from a mild sense of incompleteness or a state of irritation to the most intense experiences of bodily pain and mental anguish. Because some pain is inherent in living, the Buddha characterizes the life of the senses as not entirely satisfactory, as dukkha. It is the lack of satisfaction that leads most of us to a spiritual path. In Buddhism the entire goal of the spiritual life is to end this sense of unsatisfactoriness by finding an unshakable peace,
called nibbāna (Pali) or nirvana (Skt.). In this passage we should take the word *dukkha* to indicate this inherently unsatisfactory nature of life as experienced through the six senses.

The word translated as “happiness” is the Pali term *sukha*, which also has connotations of pleasure and contentment. In this passage, its contrast to *dukkha* means that we should consider “happiness” to point to a lasting happiness that would remove any underlying unsatisfactoriness. Therefore, to bring out the full meaning of the Pali, we might translate the Buddha’s second question as, “Is what is impermanent ultimately unsatisfying, or can it lead to lasting happiness?” The practitioners’ response then becomes, “Ultimately unsatisfying, venerable sir.”

The Buddha is not saying that all sense experience is miserable or that there is no happiness or pleasure in life. Far from it. In many discourses he talks directly about the pleasures that can be found through the senses. However, he also states clearly that sense pleasures can only give limited fulfillment; they cannot overcome the basic unsatisfactoriness of conditioned life caused by its changing nature.

**This Is Mine, This I Am, This Is My Self**

Having guided the bhikkhus to see their sense experiences as ultimately unsatisfying, the Buddha then asks them whether the sense experiences are valid grounds for identification, or ownership. Each of the phrases he uses in the third question is significant. “This is mine” expresses ownership. We own things first of all, because we desire them or some aspect of them. Because of the underlying motivation of desire, we become attached to these things. We’ve invested emotional energy into them remaining the way they are now. When they change or are broken or decay or die, as inevitably they will, we’ll suffer because the attachment will be broken too. This is the basic cycle to which the Buddha is pointing.

Ajahn Chah, a great forest master of Thailand in the twentieth century, described this well, referring to a glass of water that he was drinking from.

You say, “Don’t break my glass!” Can you prevent something that’s breakable from breaking? If it doesn’t break now it will break later on. If you don’t break it, someone else will. If someone else doesn’t
break it, one of the chickens will! Whenever you use this glass you should reflect that it’s already broken. . . . Develop this kind of understanding. Use the glass, look after it, until, one day, it slips out of your hand . . . “Smash!” . . . no problem. Why is there no problem? Because you saw its brokenness before it broke!  

The activity of attachment, also called clinging or grasping, is born from desire and is at the root of an unsatisfactory relation to life. Ownership is rooted in craving (Pali: *tanha*).

The second phrase, “This I am,” points to the activity of identification. We feel “I am this body,” or “I am angry,” or “I am the observer.” When the body is threatened, “I” am threatened. If our emotions are criticized, “I” am at risk. As Maharaj points out in the epigraph at the start of this chapter, conflict comes when we assert, “I am this,” because “this” is always changing and hence unreliable. Identification is imagining that I am a particular fragment of what exists, which is small, limited, and bound to decay. This is simply a way of conceiving of self (Pali: *maññanā*)—and we could say it is actually a form of conceit (Pali: *māna*), a technical term indicating the deep tendency to take oneself to be something.

The third phrase, “This is my self,” is similar to the second phrase but leads in a slightly different direction. “This is my self” means we have a particular view about the self, about where “I” resides. At the time of the Buddha, Indian society was crowded with philosophical and religious teachers and sects, all promoting their opinions and arguing against others. Many of these views had to do with what defined the self. Unlike, say, political views, a view about the self is at the center of our very existence and can shape our life in strong ways. If the view is incorrect, we may live our entire life in an illusion. In addition to a consciously adopted philosophical stance, such a view may also include beliefs about the self that we’ve taken on without noticing.

**PERSONALITY VIEW**

As the discourse continues, the Buddha enumerates twenty ways we can form a view about the self, based on the aggregates. This is called a self view or personality view (Pali: *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*). Here is how we form a self view around the aggregate of form, which in this context means the body:
An untaught ordinary person . . . regards material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form. . . . That is how personality view comes to be.\textsuperscript{6}

These comments may sound cryptic, but if you read them slowly, substituting “body” for “material form,” you’ll see that we have already met a few of them.

“Regards material form as self” is the view “\textit{I am the body}.” This view is limited, because the body is limited. The physical body is born in separation, lives in separation, and dies in separation. By equating the body with “I,” this view leads to fear and isolation.

“Regards self as possessed of material form” is the view “\textit{I am the owner of the body},” though somehow separate from it. As in all ownership, desire is behind this view—and a very strong one at that, since we tend to cherish and protect the body. We regard the body as the most important possession of all, and we suffer when it changes through aging, illness, or death.

“Regards material form as in self” could be the view “\textit{I am the entire range of conscious awareness},” within which the body is one object. Awareness is seen as vast and all-encompassing. Awareness includes the body, but identifying as the particular (the body) is rejected in favor of identifying as the knowing of all. “I am nothing small and limited, I am the vast expanse of awareness like the sky.” It is true that awareness includes everything, but again, assigning “I” to it is unnecessary. Such a view inclines us to a disconnection from the pesky realities of corporeal life, work, and relationship.

“Regards self as in material form” could be the view “\textit{I am the observer},” located perhaps inside the head. We might identify with the observer as a way of trying to stand apart from experiences in order to control them and gain a sense of continuity. This view can lead to timidity and to shrinking from life.

Defining the self in any one of these four ways in relation to the body is limiting. The Buddha goes on to apply the same four patterns to the other four aggregates of feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. We won’t go through these in detail, but you might like to reflect on some of them around emotions and consciousness. Five aggregates by four patterns gives twenty ways to form personality views. And every one of them is incorrect. So what is correct?
A well-taught noble disciple . . . does not regard material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form. He does not regard feeling as self . . . perception as self . . . formations as self . . . consciousness as self . . . That is how personality view does not come to be.7

SEEING AS IT ACTUALLY IS

When personality view is not formed, there is the freedom of being unconstrained, unlimited by identification with a fragment. In fact, according to Buddhist teachings, personality view is one of the fetters that is eliminated in the first stage of enlightenment, called stream-entry (Pali: sotāpatti). The Buddha concludes:

Therefore, bhikkhus, any kind of material form whatever . . . should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.” Any kind of feeling whatever . . . Any kind of perception whatever . . . Any kind of formations whatever . . . Any kind of consciousness whatever . . . should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”8

For much of the discourse, the Buddha was questioning the bhikkhus, encouraging them to investigate their experience rather than declaring what was so. But now at the end he stresses seeing “as it actually is” in relation to the aggregates. He states unequivocally that no self is to be found within the five aggregates. Moreover he tells them that in order to see in this way, they must see “with proper wisdom.” The depth of insight into not-self can’t be willed. It will come only when wisdom has been developed sufficiently. Recall that we need to use three avenues to develop proper wisdom—hearing (or reading), reflection, and meditation.

That discourse is one of the most complete teachings on not-self to be found in the Pali Canon. With every component that can be found in a being, the Buddha trains us not to see that as self. We can imagine that as he enumerated all the
incorrect views and then this correct view, his listeners must have been keenly engaged in reflecting on their own experience in the light of this advice. At the end of this discourse, “through not clinging, the minds of sixty bhikkhus were liberated from the taints.” That is, sixty disciples reached full enlightenment.

Is it possible for a human being to be so wise that he or she no longer holds the body or mind as self? Consider the advice the Buddha gave a group of disciples who were practicing in a park in the city of Sāvatthi that had been gifted to the community.

“Suppose, bhikkhus, people were to carry off the grass, sticks, branches, and foliage in this Jeta’s Grove, or to burn them, or to do with them as they wish. Would you think, ‘People are carrying us off, or burning us, or doing with us as they wish’?

“No, venerable sir. For what reason? Because, venerable sir, that is neither our self nor what belongs to our self.”

“So too, bhikkhus, form is not yours, feeling is not yours, perception is not yours, volitional formations are not yours, consciousness is not yours: abandon them. When you have abandoned them, that will lead to your welfare and happiness.”

In this passage, to “abandon” the aggregates means simply to stop clinging to them. Of course one must still look after one’s body, mind, and actions with care—but with training, one can look on this body and mind as dispassionately as one would look upon the grasses and sticks of a grove of trees.

Another story from the early days of the Sangha shows us that this is more than a theoretical possibility. An arahant monk named Adhimutta was captured by bandits, who told him they would kill him. The monk showed no sign of fear or terror. The bandit chieftain, much surprised, asked the monk why he did not tremble. Adhimutta replied in verse:

There is no mental pain
To one with no expectations.
All fears have been transcended
By one whose fetters are extinct.
It does not occur to me “I was,”
Nor does it occur to me “I will be.”
Mere formations get destroyed,
What is there to lament?
When one sees with wisdom
This world as like grass and twigs,
Not finding anything worthwhile to hold to as mine,
One does not grieve.¹⁰

Upon hearing these words, the bandits laid down their swords and let Adhimutta go. Such is the power of the mind liberated from the concept of self.
MEDITATION

Choiceless Attention, or Mindfulness of Changing Objects

In our earlier meditations, we deliberately chose to focus on one aspect of experience at a time: body posture, breath, sensations, emotions, sounds, or feeling tone. As we explore identification with the aggregates, we want to meditate in such a way that we can be aware of anything that arises. In this exercise we will not exert choice around where our attention goes.

• Begin with mindfulness of breathing. When you have established mindfulness of the breath, let go of the breath as a chosen object. Where does your attention go now? It might notice an in-breath, or a sound, or a body sensation, or an emotion, or a feeling tone. In the next moment it might land somewhere else. Wherever the attention lands—that is, whatever you notice—allow that new object to be the focus for mindfulness, for as long as the attention naturally remains there. When the attention moves again, mindfully pay attention to the new object it has found.

• In this way we allow the attention to roam freely through the sense doors, but we stay in touch with it by noticing where it is landing, moment after moment. This requires a fresh and alert interest in our experience. Everywhere attention lands, we can become mindful of that new sense contact.

• If you start to feel confused and lose the ability to be present, return the attention to the breath for a while. When you feel that you are centered, once again allow the attention to move as it will, being mindful of each new experience.