

Interconnectedness and the 5 Skandhas

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lightly edited

(contemplate intention, motivation and lineage)

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Today I'd like to dedicate the talk to Thich Nhat Hahn, who is such an inspirational figure for the world, by speaking of one of his favorite subjects which is interdependence. Hahn's beautiful calligraphy says 'to be, is to inter be'. Why I think this is so important now is that virtually all of our struggles from ecology to war are based on a certainty of separation. For example, because we see ourselves as being separate, above the natural world, we get to consume it. We are separate from other nations who don't put on clothes the way we do or who talk to different deities than we do. There are artificial boundaries that say this nation is separate from that country, from the macro to the micro we're certain of our divisions. Immigration, global warming, wars, racial prejudice, racism, sexism- all have their roots in some version of us verses them. We are separate, quite independent from those guys.

There are two levels of this dawning of our inter being, and of our interconnectedness. One comes from the softening of your heart to the sense of a bigger picture than self. We worked with this last week as the metaphor and image of living with a sword in the heart. If we allow that image to be felt, there's a shift from a dominate head space and it's incumbent chatter to heart space and a sense of belonging.

We go from monkey mind, a kind of self protection, self occupying chatter to allowing ourselves to feel and enjoy our world, humbly opening. The actual sense of separation is a head based focus. It's a sense that life is to be digested and lived from the neck up. Thought or intellectual wisdom can only take you so far and then one needs heart wisdom. Sadly, our culture associates heart wisdom with being weak when it's just the opposite. Certainty of thought, being certain and right, seems to make one vulnerable to being toppled because there is no connection to the Earth through the heart.

The meditation process constantly beacons one to a larger picture of life. We feel and sense our appreciation for how everything fits together. How there is no such thing as a 'self made man' or women, we all owe so many people for our successes. The consumption and growing of our very food is an elaborate interconnected system. It's good to do thought experiments of seeing how even this piece of paper came into being. I have given you Thich Nhat Hahn's poetic inquiry into how such a simple article as a piece of paper happens in our lives.

It is extremely beneficial to contemplate interconnectedness and no better place to do so than in nature. So here we are in nature. This insight takes us quite far and yet is still somewhat conceptual. It's a good concept but is still based on me experiencing that. The other or more absolute sense of inter being is when we get a glimpse that this thing called self, the me and mine is not actually separate from the whole of life. Here we use a Buddhist paradigm and logic to help us dismantle the certainty of an objective self that is separate from something. This is what Greg was referring to last week called the mechanics of how a solid self is created. I do return to analysis of how body is constructed and how the sense of self is constructed as a helpful tool. Quite frankly, this model helps me in my healing work for it is actually the basis of diagnosis of mind/body ailments.

The classic Buddhist way of seeing this illusion of separate self is like a wave in the ocean pretending or divorcing itself from the ocean of which it is made. It's like a Eddie Murphy voice -look at me Mom I'm a wave - all by myself having a good time, then crash back to being the ocean as you hit the shore or some interference like a back wash enfolds your identity.

So to talk about interdependence one first needs to look at how we became so certain of our separateness altogether. This is to look at the mechanics, break down the pieces of this concept, this thing that we call self. One has to suspend some sense of certainty and go into the absurd to really feel this. We are totally without a doubt certain that the tree I am looking at is separate from me. I can see that and I can hear outside of me, the sound of my voice is coming from a person and heard by another person-me. It feels crazy to think there's not an object out there which means for sure there's a subject here experiencing this object. The notion that this is a false experience doesn't even bear a moment of thought. It is absurd. Yet this is the very basis of the buddhist tradition, you as a solid thing experiencing solids things are not true. It is a dream or mistaken notion of reality.

But make no doubt from the first training or willingness to examine your mind, from the first meditation instruction, this is the concept in play. There is a glimpse of a reality that sneaks into the meditation experience that shockingly proves is true, you are a fiction of thought. There is no solid you. This no solid you is what liberation and freedom is all about. You are liberated from the tremendous arduous burden of carrying around me. Even a small lightening of the load of carrying around me makes us happier, so meditation provides some peace and joy from the very first experience of letting go.

The sensory conspiracy is that we are certain of a separateness because we can touch, see, hear something outside of us. But if you think of this it's always an inside job, a feedback loop that comes to your brain saying, this subjective experience of an objective experience is only approved by another subjective experience, namely your brain labeling something. You never receive information that isn't subjectively, self referenced, subjectively experienced. Your senses are a part of the conspiracy but the senses are experienced by a you that has been co-opted as objective. The senses are felt, heard, etc. by the brain that has conceptually formed a conspiracy that by sensing we prove it's out there. However, all out there is only experienced in here. It's all processed in house, a neat feed back loop.

You are making the whole thing up and pretending it's out there when the only way out there is experienced, is in here. It's like the Matrix in that you could be a computer game experiencing itself. In that sense meditation is the blue pill because mediation undermines holding on to me as a separate entity. You start to let go of ideas and just be which is the development of insight, vipassana.

The Buddhist story of how this feedback loop comes to be is called the 5 skandas. To me it's a plausible explanation and yet like the chicken and egg or the question of who made god, if she made everything. It slides over the question of the original motivation for the first question. Personally, I am OK with the answer of this thorny problem that the creative force did it. It's the force that did it. Buddhist say that intelligence made a creative leap, kind of got too busy exploring space and mistook process as proof of a separate individual., The intelligence mistook process as MY process or MINE experience and then the game was on.

Trungpa Rinpoche called this the cosmic joke. Intelligence pulled a joke and conceived of separation. Separation then is a creative process necessary for creation and seemingly, the loop of the creative process is completed when one is liberated from me. It's said when you awaken, get enlightened, the whole universe gets enlightened. It's a big deal to finish the painting of self separation illusion.

Trungpa Rinpoche talks about this as the innate wakefulness of human beings. He says 'The way of the Great Eastern Sun, (the Shambhala metaphor for enlightened energy) is based on seeing that there is a natural source of radiance and brilliance in the world-which is the innate wakefulness of human beings.' We, in this form as human beings, are a source of radiance and brilliance -IE- the universe gets off on our realization in some way-heavy stuff this human opportunity.

All of this is background to the explanation of how we get convinced of me as an objective separate entity experiencing out there as another objective separate thing. The 5 skandas were described by Trungpa Rinpoche as heaps or aggregates. Stack piles, heaps of vibrations that together weave an illusion of self. This really takes some work as it like breaking down a car into it's parts. There's a heap of parts that make the engine, a heap of parts that make the drive train, there's a heap of parts that form the wheels, there's a heap of parts that stops the car and there's a heap of parts that get the outside juice, in this case gasoline into the engine: 5 heaps which we put them together and then we step back and say 'car' or my Buick! Now we can go on trips and trade up and improve and build Detroit. All because of heaps. Sometimes you hear the word bundles, or aggregates, a collection of parts that are lumped together and get called a thing, like a tree or as we say in Hawaii for all kinds of things 'DA kine'.

The heaps or aggregates in Buddhist paradigm/painting that make the shiny, chrome accented, highly polished much valued 'me' are these: There is an experience of form, body parts, specifically eye, ear, nose, tongue, body sensation, touch and an central sensory computer called mind. Here's an important aside, in terms of where these parts come from, these parts are literally light, specifically 5 lights, red blue, green, yellow and white. Form that you see is built from light. The body you see is built from light. The great physicist David Boer says 'matter is frozen light'. The first conceptual bundle is called form altogether.

The second heaping of concepts we have is feelings. It's like a layering on top of form. This gives form more pizzazz. We feel things, pain, pleasure, irritating, or boredom. The complexity of our experience gets more certain, and more developed.

The third heap or conceptual pile which makes up a sense of separate self is perception: the ability to perceive the last 2 piles of ideas, form and feeling. You have a nose and something to smell which make up the heap called perception.

The fourth bundle which adds to perceptual separate self is mental formations or conceptual thought. You have thoughts and concepts about the form, feelings and perceiving. You elaborate the creation by saying this is good, this is bad, I like this, good /bad, pleasant /unpleasant-all the books and learning and words. There are concepts and commentary about everything. We now believe in ideas, concepts; male female, Republican, Democratic, my team verses your team.

Then finally the cherry on the cake is the sense or aggregate of consciousness. It's the awareness of the pieces. You are conscious of this process of life. Then the whole thing is painted with a label. Let's call this process me. The heaps take on an identity like the car is a bunch of parts, we're a bunch of processes and then we have to take care and protect this self. Polish it, see that it gets the best deals in life, the whole catastrophe. Talk to it incessantly to keep the illusion up.

Now this is the mechanics from a Buddhist point of view of why we believe we're separate. The heaps are tightly arranged with out much space in between. However, your yearning, your desire to know complete relaxation or aloha gets suspicious of this tightly wound ball of thread. That is what meditation practice does is to create pukas (wholes) in solidity. Because it's a heaped up creation, meaning the self, it isn't 100 % effective in keeping out a wisdom that's deeper than the aggregated parts. That wisdom is your yearning for the spiritual path altogether.

You want to become love, aloha itself, because that's your home. Your wisdom, your compassion, and your innate brilliance, lets little gaps or pukas of unadorned freshness and non conceptualization in. Every time you say 'thinking' or catch yourself thinking and smile in meditation practice, you bust a conceptual process. You connect to an unadorned presence which is warm and good and awake, simply as it is. There is a conspiracy of sorts against the claustrophobia of self.

It's again, like retuning to the Matrix movie. Somehow Neo is suspicious of the whole set up. It's a built in intelligence that makes you ask the question of life. Really, what is all this about? Your yearning and your dissatisfaction is your Neo, your Kenau Reeves.

Back to the beginning when the heaps have pukas, you get reality on another level. You get interconnectedness not on the level of concept but on the level of shocking insight that you were never a separate individual self. "Look Mom, I'm a wave", or to base a life on separate waviness is crazy making. It's a game changer and it happens many times a day. Sexual climax can provide a hint-you don't say me, me, me- you say 'Oh My God' and there's no you. You see the heaps are not so tightly woven that the sanity of letting go, of joining the ocean doesn't permeate. Joining the ocean holds the trump card. Oh I love that pun, because the ocean is a more joyous place to hang out than that precarious, how do I keep it all together self.

It's quite a shift from I am connected to all things to my experience as a human is an expression of the ocean. This non conceptual 'ahaa' is what fuels the Bodhisattva Path and profound interconnectedness. It's not a do gooders group. It's activity fueled by the wisdom that we're all expressions of goodness, aloha, and love.