

## *Mud Houses*

*May 4, 2021*

When the Buddha was asked to define what a being is, he didn't say there is no such thing. He answered in a straightforward way: Wherever there is attachment, there's going to be a being. Attachment to what? The five aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness.

He illustrated his point with an analogy. He said it's like little kids playing with mud houses. You might think of kids playing with sand castles. As long as the little kids were fascinated with the little mud houses, they were very protective of them. If anyone tried to come along and kick their mud houses or step on them, they would defend them. But when they lost interest in the mud houses, when they lost their desire and fascination with the mud houses, then they themselves would kick them and step on them and make them unfit for play.

In the same way, the Buddha said, try to lose your desire for the aggregates. Demolish them—make them unfit for play—and you'll be freed from being a being. We have to explain that a little bit though. You don't destroy the aggregates; you try to destroy your desire for them. That's a very different thing. The desire is what holds them all together. That's what you've got to focus on. But first you've got to see yourself—the being you've created out of these aggregates—in those terms. You have to get familiar with what an aggregate is. In other words, you've got to play with your aggregates. That's what we're doing as we practice.

When you're meditating, you've got five aggregates right here. There's the form of the body that you're sitting in right now. The breath is part of that form. There's the feeling of pleasure you're trying to create by staying focused on the breath. There's your perception of the breath, the image you have of it that allows the breath to flow through the body and can direct the flow in the different ways you want it to go. There are your thought fabrications, starting with directed thought and evaluation: adjusting the breath and figuring out how best to use the pleasure that comes when the breath is adjusted well. And then there's your consciousness of all these things.

You try to put these things together in as best a way as you can. Just like the little kids making the mud houses: You want to make a really nice little mud house here. In doing so, you learn about the aggregates. Just in getting the mind to right concentration, you begin to see there are these activities that you do. As you go into deeper stages of concentration, you begin to realize that there are more refined versions of them. You can let go of the directed thought and evaluation,

and the mind feels less burdened. You can let go of the feeling of pleasure, and you're left with a feeling with equanimity, which is even lighter.

You get the breath energy to fill the body to the extent where you don't have to breathe in and breathe out. Your sense of the boundary of the body begins to disappear. The perception that holds the notion of body in mind: You can put that down and replace it with more refined perceptions—perceptions of space, perceptions of knowing and nothingness. You begin to wonder how far you can take this process of refinement, because you see that this is a really good way of dealing with these aggregates. It's like the little kids getting really good at making really nice mud houses.

You develop a skill, and that's the best way to know anything: to get skillful with it. Otherwise, you can hear about the aggregates, and the five categories may seem like an artificial way of dividing up your experience. But when you're trying to get the mind concentrated, you see how you put this state of becoming together with precisely these activities. You find that you finally reach a limit as to how far you can go as you hold on to these activities. Then you turn around and look at the rest of your life.

You realize that's your sense of who you are: It's made out of these aggregates. As the Buddha said, even for people who have the ability to reflect back on past lifetimes, what are they reflecting back on? The form, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications and consciousness they had at those times. But you don't need to reflect on past lifetimes. Just think back on your life so far in this lifetime. When you remember your childhood, that'd be form, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. That's all there was. That's how you created your sense of self, who you were, and what you were going to use in order to get what you wanted. This is where the desire for the aggregates comes in. Either you desire the aggregates directly, or you desire them for what they can do for you.

But here you begin to see their limitations. This is the best thing you can do with aggregates—create a state of concentration—and yet concentration has its limitations, the big one being that you have to keep maintaining it. It's always ready to fall apart. You get skilled in the concentration so that you don't let it fall apart, but a steady effort has to go into that. The concentration is always something you do. You look back and you begin to realize that your idea of what you were, your identity, was something you did as well—something you're constantly doing.

Then you look forward. As the Buddha said, you'll get so that you can't stay in this body anymore, but as long as there's still clinging and craving, there's still

going to be that seamstress that stitches all this together into an identity. That's what the Buddha calls craving: a seamstress who stitches all the aggregates together and makes them into a being. When you can't stay with these aggregates, you're going to find more aggregates to repeat the process. As you reflect on this, there comes a point where it all begins to seem futile. No matter how good it gets, you never really arrive with the aggregates, because they're all fabricated.

The nature of fabrication is that it's done for the sake of something. It's moving towards something. When it arrives, it keeps on moving toward something else and moves toward something else. It never really arrives. The only thing that arrives is the path, which you're making out of these aggregates. It's the best thing you can do with them. Use the aggregates of concentration to develop a sense of dispassion for other kinds of aggregates. But then you're still here with the concentration; you're still here with the discernment.

This is where the discernment gets really sharp, when it begins to see that even the concentration and the discernment are fabricated. If you're going to find real happiness, you have to let them go, too. And insight is what allows you to let go.

It's going to be a very special insight. When the Buddha talks about it, he talks about it in paradoxical terms. You intend the path, putting it all together, but there comes a point where you have to stop intending. You can't tell yourself, "Don't intend," because that will become your new intention. But there is a middle way between intending and telling yourself not to intend, and that's the escape. What allows for the escape is dispassion. It's the point where you lose interest in this mud house, and you make it unfit for play. In other words, you take the mind to where it's not going to build mud houses anymore.

You've seen the house builder, as the Buddha said after his awakening. You've demolished the last house, and the house builder is not going to build any more. That's when you've really arrived. Even with just the first taste of awakening, stream-entry, you see that there is such a thing as a dimension where there is no fabrication, and it's totally devoid of any kind of stress. You don't realize how much stress goes into fabrication until you step out of it.

But the only way you're going to get there is to get to know these aggregates really well. You can read about them and say, "Gee, what the Buddha says makes a lot of sense," but that's not going to cut through your fascination with them. You have to work with them. Make them into a state of concentration; use this body to practice virtue, generosity, and meditation; use the mind to get into concentration, to develop discernment, and to allow these things to deliver you to something that's beyond them. That's when you really lose your passion for these things, and all the stitching of the seamstress falls apart.

What's left after that? It depends on your karma, but your relationship with the six senses is altered. For an arahant, there's no more feeding on things because there's no hunger. There's no more being that needs to be fed. This is why, when people asked the Buddha whether an arahant after death exists or doesn't exist, or both or neither, he wouldn't answer, because it was the passion of the aggregates that defined the person who became an arahant. When there's no passion, the arahant is undefined. When something's undefined, you can't say anything about it.

But there is nibbana, and this is the path that takes you there. That's why the Buddha called it the path that takes you someplace really good. You don't stay on the path. You don't take the path as your goal. If you stayed on the path, he wouldn't have called it a path. It would have been a noble eightfold spot. But it's a noble eightfold path that takes you someplace beyond it. As you practice the path, you learn about these aggregates by playing with them, making the best things possible with them. Then, finally, they deliver you to where you want to go. And everyone who's been there said that's the end of all problems.

So think of that image of the children. They were creating problems—with their possessiveness—by playing around. But if you learn how to play wisely, you can put those problems down.