

The Mistake of the Ego

*Ego is no more than this: identification with form . . .
If evil has any reality—and it has relative, not an absolute reality—
this is also its definition: complete identification with form—
physical forms, thought forms, emotional forms.*

—ECKHART TOLLE, *A New Earth*

LIKE EMPTINESS, ego is also one of the most important and misunderstood topics in spirituality. It is accused of being the source of our suffering, the thing we are supposed to either befriend, transcend, or destroy. To progress along the path, we need to come to terms with ego, to face it and discover its essence. Relating inappropriately to the ego is the source of a great deal of unnecessary hardship.

From an absolute perspective, the ego does not exist. This is important to understand because it sets the view and shows us where we are going. In other words, we should never try to get rid of the ego because there is nothing to get rid of. Trying to get rid of the ego ironically reifies it. We are wrestling with an illusion and wondering why we cannot pin it down. So the point is not to get rid of it but to see through it. We may already know better, that destroying the ego is not the point, but we still sit in meditation and try to get rid of our thoughts or banish unwanted experiences. This is the same as trying to erase the ego.

We tend to relate to the ego the way a child relates to a monster in his room. A child wakes up in the night screaming that he just saw a monster. We comfort the child and assure him that no such beast exists, but no matter what we say, he doesn't believe us. To prove our point, we have to ask the child where he saw the monster, go there, and show him that there is nothing there. We show him it is not in the closet, under the bed, or behind the door. Only when he sees for himself, does he finally believe the monster doesn't exist.

In a similar way, in the darkness of ignorance, we believe that we exist. It doesn't matter what others say, we know in our bones that this monstrous sense of self is here. We can feel it. The only way to prove that it doesn't exist is to turn on the light of wisdom and look at where we think it is. Only when we try to find it and discover that there is no ego in the closet, under the bed, or behind the door, do we come to the stark and liberating realization that we absolutely do not exist.

On the relative level, of course, we appear to exist. We each have a body, thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. We relate to other people and we each come to the mutual conclusion that you are out there and I am in here. This conclusion may be mutual, but it is misinformed. Relative truth, remember, is truth from the perspective of confusion. We don't each have our bodies, feelings, perceptions, and thoughts—they have us. They “have” us in the sense that we are so completely identified with them, with these forms, that we forget that we are the formless (empty) awareness that lies beneath all form. We are possessed. We are possessed by that which we feel we possess.

Unraveling the ego on the path is a necessary hardship. Getting to know that which creates such a relative and absolute fuss can help us relate to and remove a lot of trouble. In the next few chapters, we will discover how the illusion of the ego is constructed, and therefore how it can be deconstructed. We will see how that deconstruction is initially felt as frustration, and eventually as panic and fear.

☸ The Five Heaps

In order to arrive at the absolute, emptiness, we have to go through the relative, the ego. In order to discover the truth of our nonexistence and the heart of liberation, we have to examine existence and the heart of entrapment. What is the ego? What is it made of? What does it live on? When Siddhartha sat under the bodhi tree 2,600 years ago, he looked closely at these questions. What he discovered transformed him into the Buddha. He saw that the ego is just a gloss over five aspects of experience, what are called the five skandhas in Sanskrit. *Skandha* means “heap,” or “aggregate.” The Buddha saw that the ego is one bad and deeply entrenched habit that causes lots of trouble.

He also saw that the difficulty in sharing his insight is that the five skandhas occur so quickly and are so much the fabric of our being that we do not see them. It is like trying to see the insides of our eyelids, which are so close to our eyes that we can't see them. It's time to pull our eyelids back and take a look.*

The five skandhas describe the development of the ego. They are the five building blocks of experience that we glom onto that generate the illusion of self. The five heaps also describe the construction of duality and the process of perception altogether. In other words, by describing the construction of a sense of self in here, we simultaneously describe the construction of the sense of other out there. We can't have one without the other. The illusion of self and other is bootstrapped. They are created simultaneously and interdependently—they lift each other up. Self and other are both constructed perceptions, they are “takes” on reality. In this case they are *mistakes*.

The five skandhas occur rapidly, and until we reach the fourth and fifth skandha, they occur subliminally. Accounts vary, but they flash

* The description and use of the five skandhas that follows is not entirely traditional. It follows the inimitable view of Trungpa Rinpoche, who infuses this principally Hinayana teaching with Vajrayana wisdom.

by about once every five-hundredths of a second. They are called heaps because they heap on top of each other to create the final illusion of self and the mistake of duality. It is like a conveyor belt where an item is passed down and progressively assembled until the final product is made. It is a pattern of duality that continually strengthens until the manufactured sense of self and other pops out the other end. This popping out occurs constantly, unconsciously, and rapidly.

Before we go over these heaps, it is important to understand the context within which they arise. Because the first skandha is that of form, it is easy to fall into a materialist, and therefore reductionist, view. (“Form” usually refers to visual forms, but here “form” refers to the contents of all five senses—to whatever we can perceive with our senses.) The first skandha is the only one that corresponds to the external physical world, so it is easy to think that things start from matter (form) and can be reduced to it. But the skandha of form arises out of vast and formless space. It is, in fact, an unconscious reaction to space. In other words, the ego is born out of an inappropriate relationship to the absolute freedom of open space. To appropriate means “to take possession of”; to “*in*appropriate” means to *mis*take, and that is exactly what the ego does to space.

To get a feel for the first skandha, imagine a completely open space. It is unknowable, ineffable, unnamable, and awake. It is prior to existence, but it is not nonexistence. It is freedom, indescribable liberation, infinite and eternal. This is not ordinary physical space, even though that is the best analogy for it, but the space of mind.†

† Just like outer space, inner space may seem powerless because it can’t really do anything. But this space has tremendous power. Space accommodates and holds everything, allowing any action to take place. Space is also indestructible. You can’t cut it, bomb it, or burn it. Space cannot be hurt.

Inner space is the same. By opening our heart and mind, we can discover this inner space and accommodate anything that happens, allowing the experiences of our life to take place without resistance or reservation. This receptivity manifests as kindness and compassion, first expressed to ourselves, and then to others. We accept the circumstances of our life and who we are, which is kindness and benefit to ourselves. And we accept others just as they are, which is kindness and benefit to all beings. (*continues on facing page*)

This is the groundless ground of all being and form. It is nirvana, the absolute, a vast openness, emptiness. Trungpa Rinpoche once said that space is the Buddhist version of God.

But we, as the ego, can't stand it. We are afraid of this "God." It is not because this God is too demanding or restrictive. On the contrary, we fear space because it is too open and vast. It is everything we want, and it is the heart of who we are, but it is just too much space. We cannot relate to it because there is no-thing to relate to. So instead of relaxing into this open space, we freeze it. Instead of dissolving into infinity, we contract into something finite. Instead of melting into eternity, we petrify into time. Instead of resting in nirvana, we congeal in samsara. In other words, we panic.

We forget Khenpo Rinpoche's teaching to be "open . . . spacious . . . and relaxed," and we freak out and freeze space. That very reaction to space, that self-contraction, transforms the groundless into ground. Stephen Hodge, in his commentary on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, talks about the experiences of the dead, the formless mind that has dissolved back into this primordial space after death, and his comments apply here: "Unable to withstand the experience of limitless expansion, they may react by curling in upon themselves, and mentally turning away from all that spaciousness in order to shut themselves off from the all-encompassing terror [that is, the truth of their nonexistence]."⁷³

✿ The First Skandha

That panic *is* the first skandha, which is form. Form is made of panic, and it is a profoundly inappropriate relationship to the formless. It is an unconscious response to the truth of our nonexistence, a knee

This inner space is also indestructible. Insults pass through us without hitting anything; personal attacks and offenses have no place to land. We allow all movement, but we ourselves remain unmoved. Others can cut, bomb, and burn our body, but our heart and mind remain unscathed. When the Vietnamese monks immolated themselves in protest of the war, they were able to do so because fire cannot harm space.

jerk reaction to the empty space that is the heart of who we absolutely are. This is a critical point, the crux of the entire construction project of the ego: the first skandha, form, is based on fear, bewilderment, and ignorance. It *is* fear, bewilderment, and ignorance taking form.

The ego is therefore conceived from a stunned reaction to space. Trungpa Rinpoche says, “The whole development of the five skandhas [the ego] is an attempt on our part to shield ourselves from the truth of our insubstantiality.”⁷⁴ If space is the Buddhist version of God, the first skandha is the Buddhist version of original sin. And just like with the ego, from an absolute point of view, “original sin” is also merely a nonexistent delusion. Mathematician George Spencer-Brown probably did not know about the skandha of form, but he describes its spirit elegantly in his mathematical treatise, *The Laws of Form*:

A universe comes into being when a space is severed or taken apart. The skin of a living organism cuts off an outside from an inside. So does the circumference of a circle in a plane. By tracing the way we represent such a severance, we can begin to reconstruct, with an accuracy and coverage that appear almost uncanny, the basic forms underlying linguistic, mathematical, physical and biological science, and can begin to see how the familiar laws of our own experience follow inexorably from the original act of severance.⁷⁵

One way to glimpse the energy of the first skandha is to look for instances that exaggerate its genesis, this process of panic. Moments of intense self-consciousness provide such a glimpse. If you have ever given a public talk or performed for others, you know the nervous energy that accompanies performance. If you ride that energy, it can infuse your performance with passion. But that energy can transform into panic if it is not managed and can then negatively affect your performance. One aspect of this panic is intense self-consciousness. It's as if all the awareness being placed upon you by the audience some-

how draws your own awareness onto yourself. Awareness implodes onto itself, and that implosion gives birth to (an exaggerated sense of) self.

The more self-conscious we are, the more our performance suffers; the less self-conscious, the more our performance shines. This includes any performance on the stage of life. If we are very self-conscious when we meet someone we want to impress, we may fumble for the right word or act clumsily. If we are open, spacious, relaxed, and not self-conscious, then we naturally tend to shine.

As a pianist and public speaker, I have experienced the entire range of self-consciousness. When I am relaxed and in the flow, it almost feels like I am not even the one performing. I feel like a conduit for some higher energy that flows through me. But when I contract in self-consciousness and worry about how I appear, I struggle on stage and my performance suffers. And so it is, to varying degrees, with every action based on the self-centeredness of the first skandha.

The first skandha, in other words, is an intense and continuous form of self-consciousness. (It is represented in the myth of Narcissus, the lad frozen in love with his own image-form.) In this fundamental sense, this level of self-consciousness gives birth to the sense of self altogether. The self becomes conscious—it comes to life—as awareness implodes onto itself. The ego is therefore a constant panic attack, and the panic is the ego's response to the truth of its own nonexistence.

Upon this illusory rock of frozen space, the ego will now build its church. Fear, panic, bewilderment, ignorance, and denial form the ground upon which the ego stumbles into the world. Stephen Hodge summarizes the situation this way:

Our so-called self, the ego, is a parasitical illusion without any substantial existence, something that has been constructed as a defense mechanism to deal with the experience of impermanence. As it strives to create itself out of empty space and become solid, the ego-self always feels paranoid that it will be discovered for what it is—a hollow illusion.

It works hard to maintain its status of “self-importance” and suffers greatly as the all-encompassing reality of great space continuously dissolves the fabric of its being. Having no basis in reality, the ego-self keeps crumbling away and must be constantly reinvented.⁷⁶

With this ground established, we can now proceed quickly through the remaining skandhas and the constant reinvention of the self. We will then bring the whole enterprise into practical focus around meditation and hardship. The first skandha is the most important because it sets the stage for what is to be built upon it. Once we have broken away from the truth and made the primordial cut of duality (the first skandha), we can rapidly descend into all kinds of deception (skandhas two through five).

It is important to realize that the skandhas did not occur sometime in the hazy past, leaving us now helpless victims under their control. The implosion of awareness that gives birth to self (consciousness) occurs constantly. It is happening right now. The original sin of duality occurs every time we see ourselves as separate from the rest of the world, and it occurs preconsciously. We are not aware of this deeply ingrained and habitual response to space.

Even though we are emphasizing the skandha of form as it manifests most intimately in our physical body, the first skandha extends to encompass anything that can be perceived by the five senses. It includes the environment. The final point is that even though we were born with a body (form), and even though Freud was right when he said, “Ego is first and foremost a body ego,” our body is not the problem. It is our relationship to body that is the problem. That relationship is constituted by the next four skandhas.

🌸 Skandhas Two through Five

As we go through the remaining skandhas, we need to keep in mind that we are learning about the construction of the ego because the path is about its deconstruction. By studying how the ego is put

together, we can better understand why it hurts to take it apart. The ego is the fundamental “thing,” and therefore the mother of all things. By dissolving it into no-thing, we start to dissolve everything. We start to realize emptiness, and we do so very personally.

The second skandha is “feeling,” and it refers to the way we automatically relate to what we have frozen. We unconsciously reach out and feel these frozen forms, to size them up. Feeling is a reflexive and primitive response to form, before any higher conceptual processes enter in. Feeling is at the level of both body and mind, and it is the link between the two. This early stage of the relationship is one of finding the form either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; either supportive, threatening, or neither. This is the precondition of what is called the three poisons, the three most fundamentally inappropriate ways of relating to reality, and these three feelings will take complete birth in the next skandha as passion, aggression, and ignorance.

Relating to form appropriately means relating to whatever arises with equanimity. It is not to judge the form, or always refer it back to ourselves. If we can let forms arise without grasping them, pushing them away, or spacing out, they self-liberate—in both senses. Self-liberation means we don’t have to do anything to be free. It is the highest form of liberation, one that we will return to in part 3. The forms liberate themselves, and we simultaneously self (ego) liberate. If left alone, forms arise in our experience and dissolve, like clouds passing in the sky.

As we saw earlier, there is no problem with anything that arises in reality, even the frozen forms of the first skandha—which is *everything* that arises in our physical experience. The problem, again, is one of inappropriate relationship. The three poisons are the essence of all inappropriate relationship, and they are conceived at the level of feeling.

The second skandha is like putting our hand inside a black bag full of all kinds of unknown stuff, all manner of forms. We don’t know what these things are yet (skandhas three through five have not yet occurred), but we can feel them. Some forms are soft and fuzzy, and

therefore we enjoy feeling them. Others are prickly, so we push those away, and still others are such that we are indifferent to them.

Trungpa Rinpoche writes: “Having already the basic form, something definite and solid to hold onto [the skandha of form], we go a little beyond that to trying to identify that form as friend or enemy, hostile or welcoming. This has the effect of solidifying whatever it is even further as something that defines ego’s position by implication.”⁷⁷ In other words, “One must constantly try to prove that one does exist by feeling one’s projections as a solid thing. Feeling the solidity of something seemingly outside you reassures you that you are a solid entity as well.” If we are able to define something “out there,” the immediate implication is that there must be something “in here”—the witnessing ego. In this unconscious and reflexive way, both self and other are simultaneously brought further into the world.

The third skandha is called “perception,” or perception-impulse. “Perception” here refers to receiving information from the world of form, and “impulse” is our further response to that information. This is where the three poisons, conceived at the skandha of feeling, come to rapid maturation as passion, aggression, and ignorance. At the level of feeling, these three poisons were inarticulate, still at a gut level. At the third skandha, we now want some forms more clearly, don’t want others, and couldn’t care less about still others. It is as if we are now able to feel more completely into the black bag and attach meaning to the things we had only felt before, and as a result, we develop a deeper relationship to these things.

This skandha refers to the process of recognizing an object, recognizing its distinctive characteristics, for example, color, size, male or female, friend or enemy, and it literally affects the way we see. The other night I was walking into my dark garage when I was suddenly struck by a form I saw in the back seat of my car. I had a brief moment of panic as my mind raced to figure out who or what was in my car. In a microsecond I recognized and remembered the large duffle bag I had left propped up in the back seat. My “perception” was now complete, and I was literally able to see the bag more clearly now

that I knew what it was. In dealing with the process of perception, the colloquialism, “I’ll believe it when I see it,” is replaced with, “I’ll see it when I believe it.” This was a revealing demonstration of what I do constantly as my mind races to figure out my world.

The fourth skandha is called “formations,” and its name suggests the increasingly complete formation of a solid world of self and other. This is where our labels, judgments, identifications, and concepts come in to color our world. Francesca Fremantle provides this helpful list of other translations that point to the scope of this large “heap”: thoughts, intellect, concept, mental events, mental occurrences, mental factors, mental formations, mental constructions, volition, intention, motivation, impulses, forces, conditions, activities, predispositions, and habitual tendencies.⁷⁸ “Formations” are not yet at the level of full-blown thought and emotion, which finally arise at the fifth skandha, but they are what move us into thought and emotion. They are the triggers of fully manifest thought, word, and deed.

The fourth skandha is like a stream of sparks. Up to this point we have been reacting and perceiving mostly at an unconscious level, but with the fourth and fifth skandhas, we finally get into consciousness. The “perception” of the last skandha now triggers action at the level of body, speech, and mind. But once again, if we just related to the perception of the third skandha properly, it would be like a campfire spark that harmlessly disappears into the night sky. The spark self-liberates if we just let it. No action, and therefore no karma, would result.

But instead of making use of another chance at self-liberation, we take the final step into full-blown self-consciousness. The fifth skandha is called “consciousness,” and it is here that the ego (self) becomes fully conscious of itself. Instead of letting the sparks of the fourth skandha dissolve into space, consciousness throws gasoline onto them. That gasoline comes in the form of (implosive) attention. The untrained mind pours attention onto the sparks that arise within it and whoosh!—off we go into discursive thought, emotional indulgence, or fantasy.

This happens all the time, and since we are now at the level of

consciousness, it is easy to see. Meditators work with this constantly, but anyone who thinks will recognize the display of the fourth and fifth skandhas. For example, we hear the distant sound of a police siren. A tiny spark of perception, already identified and related to at the level of the third skandha, has just popped into our mind. Without even knowing it, our attention pours onto this perception, and we are off into a discursive commentary: “Where is the cop car going? I bet somebody is in big trouble. Better them than me. I hope it’s not too serious. This world is a mess. Why are those sirens so loud . . .” A harmless little spark of perception triggers a mushroom cloud of discursiveness. And so we fill our minds, our days, and our very lives with this constant chatter triggered by our perceptions.

Consciousness keeps the whole process of the five skandhas in operation, and therefore feeds the ego to keep it happy. If there is a gap in the process, consciousness patches it up. It’s like a radar beam that constantly sweeps across the other four heaps and then plugs up any holes. The fifth skandha is like an aerobics instructor who is always goading us on, shouting “keep it going!” It is like the ego’s coach on the sidelines, barking out encouragement to keep us moving, to keep the karma going—to keep the sense of self alive.

This is what the ego is made of. There are endless details and varying interpretations, but the important points are the following: the ego is not a single indivisible thing but a collection of parts glued together by constant movement. The ego was not suddenly created by some big bang in the distant past, but is constantly brought to life moment to moment. The ego is conceived through an inappropriate relationship and is kept alive by discursiveness. All these factors will come into play as we talk below about meditation and the unraveling of the skandhas.

Pay attention to your mind and you will notice these skandhas, especially the fourth and fifth, popping in and out incessantly. If we simply witness them, they provide a harmless display of the natural movement and radiance of the mind. This, of course, is the essence of meditation, to witness whatever arises with complete equanimity. But if we don’t, these harmless sparks ignite our worldly actions of

body, speech, and mind, and therefore transform into the sparkplugs that drive the engine of samsara. Once again, that which we witness on the meditation cushion is that which runs our life off the cushion. The point of meditation is to start to see this and to develop a proper relationship to it—and to ourselves. We do not have to get rid of the skandhas, we do not have to get rid of the ego, but if we want to get rid of unnecessary hardship, we do have to relate to them properly.

Frustration by Design

When meditation gets good enough and you start to threaten your sense of self, you may get more reactive rather than less reactive. There may be a heightening of vulnerability, a susceptibility to feeling threatened. You may react more strongly and angrily to things because you're trying hard to reconstitute the self that is under pressure and slowly dissolving.

— HARVEY ARONSON, "Psychology and Buddhism"

ARMED WITH the five skandhas, we now return to the practicalities of hardship on the path and to a deeper understanding of why hardship occurs. We will approach it by emphasizing the role of meditation in relation to the first and fifth skandhas, the ground and fruit of the ego. As we will see, space and speed are at the heart of nirvana and samsara respectively.

☸ Meditation, Frustration, and the Fifth Skandha

We begin where we left off, at the level of the fifth skandha, to see how meditation works with consciousness. Movement is the heartbeat of consciousness. As we saw earlier, movement is the "substance" of the realm of desire. At a physiological level, if we do not move, or if something in our field of awareness does not move, then consciousness tends to be absent. For example, if you place your hand on your

thigh and leave it there unmoving, you will quickly lose consciousness of your hand. Without moving it, you will not be able to tell where your hand ends and your thigh begins. Your hand and thigh have dissolved into a form of nonduality.

If you hold your open eyes perfectly still, you will shortly experience a type of blindness. Our eyes are constantly blinking and darting around, our pupils are always contracting and expanding, and a continuous high frequency tremor, called microneurostagnus, is constantly at work to bring forth visual consciousness. Keep it all still, and the visual world disappears. Richard Gregory, dean of the psychology of seeing, writes, "When the image is optically stabilized vision fades after a few seconds, and so it seems that part of the function of eye movements is to sweep the image over the receptors so that they do not adapt and so cease to signal to the brain the presence of the image in the eye."⁷⁹

To enhance states of meditative absorption, it is recommended that you hold your body still, temporarily hold your breath, and quiet the movement of your eyes. Try it and notice the effect on your mind. Eye movement is related to the movement of thought, and neurolinguistic programming even associates the direction of this movement with different thought states. Dream states are marked by REM, or rapid eye movement, which is the stage of sleep where the movement of thought transforms into a dream reality. In the inner yogas, the movement of breath is directly associated with the movement of thought. When a meditator enters the deepest meditations, all breathing can stop as all thoughts cease. In short, at every level, movement triggers consciousness.

Mental movement is the heart of consciousness, especially the self-consciousness of the fifth skandha. Our sense of self is kept alive by relentless motion. Meditation faces this movement head on, and it does so by frustrating movement. The first thing we do in meditation is nothing. We sit still. We have gone on strike against the corrupt movements of the ego. By sitting still we are boycotting the machinery that generates and sustains the ego. Trungpa Rinpoche says that we have to create chaos in the efficient mechanism of

consciousness, and nothing can do that except absolute nothing—which is meditation.

The minute we stop moving, alarms go off at the level of the fifth skandha. Remember that its job is to keep the whole process going, to keep the ego alive by looking for gaps in the “efficient mechanism.” When we sit down to do nothing, that is the greatest threat to the life of the ego. We are holding a knife against its throat, and it will do whatever it takes to get us going again. It will tell us that we have better things to do, that this is a waste of time, that we will never be able to meditate. The coach will kick into gear and start barking out motivating thoughts to get us off our ass and into the world.

Meditation, doing nothing, frustrates the mechanism of the five skandhas, and this translates into literal frustration. It really is frustrating to meditate—and it is supposed to be. It is frustration by design; necessary hardship. The litany of complaints from meditators is legion: it’s boring, tedious, and irritating. For beginning meditators, or if sessions are kept short, frustration may not arise. We are still window shopping. But if we extend our sessions, meditation will challenge us and expose our addiction to movement.

By sitting still we are starving the motion-craved ego, and the resulting hunger for action can be intense. We can reach the point where we feel that if we do not move, we will lose our mind. The five skandhas are starting to unravel, and this frustration is a good sign. We have entered the stage of hot boredom, which triggers the itch to move. We want to create a mental breeze and cool off, perhaps remembering we need to return a phone call or run to the store. And it is urgent. Doing nothing gives the ego a cardiac arrest.

Sogyal Rinpoche defines two types of laziness. The first is laziness as we usually think of it, the second is what he calls “active laziness,” and it is epidemic. It is the constant busyness, the business of samsaric life, that serves to distract us from taking a closer look at things. It creates the gloss that keeps us skimming across the surface of life, never allowing us to plumb its depths. “I can’t meditate, I have bills to pay, kids to pick up, food to buy . . .” It is a distraction therapy for the ego, a way to keep it all going and a way to shield ourselves from

deeper and uncomfortable truths. All that hard work and ceaseless activity is just laziness in motion.

In the movie *Speed*, a criminal places on a bus a bomb that is set to explode if the bus drops below forty-five miles an hour. It is the desperate job of the bus driver, Sandra Bullock, and the detective hero, Keanu Reeves, to keep the bus moving. They crash through things, roll over others, and generally create a big mess to keep the bus going. Your ego has stuck you with a similar explosive, and it is the desperate job of consciousness, the driver of the five skandhas, to keep you moving. Let your mind drop below forty-five thoughts per minute, or whatever speed limit you have set to maintain your sanity, and it feels like you will explode.

There is a deeper sense of “you” that transcends the ego altogether and does not fear stillness. It longs for it. This is your spiritual essence, that deeper part of you that is fed up with the relative activities of the world and wants out. These two parts of yourself, the relative and the absolute, battle each other initially. Material and spiritual desire go head-to-head as the old habits for self-fulfillment clash with the new passions for self-transcendence. Just knowing that these relative and absolute forces are at work can help you transform this wrestling match into a dance. Instead of fighting with the old passions that move you, you start to understand them and bring them onto your new path. You remember the adage “transcend but include.”

Relating properly to movement is critical on the path. By understanding what moves you, why you love to move, and how the path works with motion, you find yourself moving more gracefully and rapidly along the path. And you do so by sitting still.

✿ Meditation, Fear, and the First Skandha

It is important to realize that the path does not just reverse the process of the five skandhas—it is not that clean, simple, or predictable. As always, the map is never the territory, and reality is never so tidy. But we can better understand hardship by looking at how a journey back through the skandhas orients the basic thrust of the

path and the tough times we encounter upon it. Sandra Maitri says, “what we have to do to regain contact with our depths is to retrace, in effect, our developmental steps.”⁸⁰ In other words, we can use the skandhas as a teaching tool to shed light on why the path can be so hard. The skandhas can be used as a map that helps us orient and understand our pain. The path is messy, but the five heaps can help us clean it up.

The fifth skandha is what we first encounter in meditation, and it constitutes the majority of our meditative experience.* We start the path at the top of the heap, where thoughts and emotions are what we see when we begin to look into our minds and when we try to figure out who and what we are. The fifth skandha, after all, is consciousness. The deeper skandhas are mostly unconscious processes and therefore initially inaccessible, but with training we can learn how to feel them. The deeper we go, the more we enter the domain of feeling, and even though “feeling” refers to the second skandha itself, the word also applies to the unconscious panic of the first skandha, which takes place well before the knowable thoughts of consciousness. Panic is not a thought but a gut-level feeling.

When we begin to explore ourselves (the five skandhas), we are greeted by the ego’s initial defensive systems, which are still the relatively harmless experiences of boredom, frustration, and irritation. The ego would prefer that we not take a look, for remember, ignorance is ego’s bliss, so these annoying experiences are its first “Keep Out” sign. Stay busy, don’t bother with this spiritual stuff, we have better things to do.

As we cut through the outer skandhas into deeper territory, the defenses become increasingly formidable and effective. Instead of a “Do not enter” sign, we come up against barbed wire and flames.

* It is unclear whether our ordinary experience is just the fifth skandha, or includes some of the fourth. Jeremy Hayward, a physicist and Buddhist scholar, says, “The fifth skandha is not pure consciousness *itself*, but includes what we are conscious of, i.e., some of the fourth, which is something similar to the relation between the conscious and the subconscious.” E-mail message to author, August 2008.

ing trenches. We go from initial frustration into real fear. When we descend to the first skandha, we are starting to get somewhere, and the forces at work are no longer a joke.

In the following quotation, Sandra Maitri is not writing about the five skandhas, though she very well could be. She is speaking about ego development in the lineage of Claudio Naranjo and A. H. Almaas:

This layer of fear becomes particularly apparent in the process of retrieving contact with Essence [the open space before the first skandha], as we experientially move beyond the outer strata of the personality [skandhas two through five] and begin getting close to the underlying state of deficient emptiness.[†] It is this layer of fear that is the archetype of signal anxiety, the sense of impending danger that we feel as something stored in the unconscious starts making its way into awareness, and which mobilizes the ego's defensive systems to keep this content sealed off from consciousness. Signal anxiety, then, is a superficial manifestation of this primal layer of fear. It is . . . paradoxically the same fear that catapulted us out of contact with Essence in the first place.⁸¹

What we are trying to see in this chapter, and with the Second Turning altogether, is that these frightening deeper spiritual experiences are indeed just a joke. There is nothing behind these formidable defenses; they are absolutely empty. It is only when we take the feelings to be real and forget the space that lies beyond them that we suffer. The spikes of fear are not the problem, it is how we relate to the spikes that becomes the problem.

[†] Deficient emptiness lies at the core of her description of the ego and is the result of losing contact with our essential nature. This is not the same emptiness we have been talking about, but a negative state of emptiness, a deficiency, that lies at the heart of the ego.

If we think these defenses are solid, that we really will lose our mind if we continue, then from the ego's point of view it has succeeded in keeping us out. It has duped and distracted us yet again from discovering the truth. But like the end of the *Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy realizes that the wizard is just a facade, we can finally take the necessary steps directly into our fear and discover the liberating space beyond. We can cut through the panic of the first skandha and rest in open space.

This may seem like a lofty experience, but it can happen at any time. After about five years of meditation, I had my first "close encounter" with emptiness. I was doing an evening meditation session at my local center and was settling into a "good" meditation. My mind was slowing down. Suddenly I felt like I was dropping into a bottomless pit, and my heart started pounding. A surge of panic hit me along with a terrible feeling that I didn't exist.

My first impulse was to run, but I sat in this uncomfortable space until the session was over. My mind would dip into this dark pit of nonexistence, then jump back up into consciousness awareness. I felt like I was a yo-yo bouncing up and down from near terror to relief. I didn't know it at the time, because I did not know anything about the skandhas, but it almost felt like I was cycling through the heaps—from near terror at the bottom of the heap (the panic that is the first skandha), to relief at the top (the fifth skandha).

I was relieved when the session was over and I could finally move, but I also think that if I could have stayed in that space for the entire evening, a breakthrough might have occurred. But I couldn't. I was happy to be actively lazy again.

It is important to realize that if we experience space without reference to the ego, it becomes a breath of fresh air. If we do not try to contain infinity but allow ourselves to dissolve into it, space becomes what it is. It is "God," nirvana. By knowing this we can more readily face the barrier of fear, embrace it, and then walk through it into the space beyond. This is when we really have to follow our fear and go through it.

As we have seen, the skandha of form is created by freezing space

(the space of mind). On an absolute level, of course, it is impossible to freeze space, but relatively we generate the illusion of frozen space—the facade of form. It is like the story of the magician who created an illusory lion that then turned around and ate the magician. We are the magicians of our own reality, and by making it real and forgetting that we did so, we fall prey to our own magical powers.

☸ Siddhi and Speed

We talked earlier about siddhi, or psychic power. Siddhi is a testament to the power of the mind, and it seems to be reserved for the highest stages of the path. We have to be pretty advanced to walk through walls and fly through space. But you and I demonstrate a form of samsaric siddhi now, for we are constantly transforming space into solid form. Far from being mystical, for the ego this is a practical and necessary manifestation of its power. It is a miracle that the ego routinely performs to keep itself alive.

How do we freeze space? How do we create the illusion of form out of the reality of emptiness? We do it by relating inappropriately to space through the implosive reaction of panic, and the heart of panic is blinding speed. Speed freezes space. We have seen how motion is the principal “substance” of the realm of desire and that rapid motion is a principal form of substance abuse.

If you extend your hand while sitting still, it can easily move through space. Your hand is free to do what you want. But if you extend your hand out of a car moving at one hundred miles an hour, you quickly discover what speed does to space. Your hand is no longer free to move about. You have to wrestle with the freezing space to move it where you want.[†]

Similarly, before I freeze mental space, my mind is open, spacious, and relaxed. It is free. I can do whatever I want. There is no you,

[†]This is just an analogy for freezing space, for which we have few. The wrestling here comes from air resistance brought about by movement, but hopefully you get the point.

there is no me, so “I” am free to dance and play. But once I freeze space, I now have to deal with you and me and every other icy form I bump into. I am restricted by the forms I have frozen into reality.

When I took my first sky dive, I was instructed to step out of the plane that was flying at four thousand feet and stand on a tiny platform. As I stepped out, I was stunned by the blast of air and had to grasp tightly onto a rail attached to the wing. It was said that Jesus could walk on water, a truly miraculous feat, but I have seen many barefoot water skiers do the same thing by traveling at fifty miles an hour. All kinds of samsaric miracles occur and forms of illusion arise when speed comes into play.

Look closely at moments of panic or moments of intense self-consciousness and you will discover an initial implosion of awareness followed by a stunning impact. The greater the self-consciousness, the more seemingly solid the space. If we are a bit nervous, then we won't restrict ourselves, and our performance won't suffer, but if we are frozen stiff in self-consciousness, we won't be able to move. Another example is when we are hit with sudden bad news. Out of the blue your spouse tells you she's having an affair and wants a divorce, or you hear that a loved one has been killed. It literally feels like you have been struck, and people can go into shock from the force of this impact.

We are emphasizing the way that the first skandha arises because the discovery of space is one purpose of meditation. The path is about returning to this groundless ground, the space prior to the big bang of the first skandha. The etymology of “religion” (re-ligio) suggests this process: linking back to space. As Deepak Chopra says, “All this effort to learn, when all we have to do is remember.” But the ego does not want to remember, and amnesia is a natural consequence of post-traumatic stress disorder, the trauma of constantly hearing the hard truth of our nonexistence. Ignorance really is bliss for the ego.

This primordial amnesia is the root of all subsequent mindlessness. Recall that mindfulness, *drenpa*, means “to remember.” At the deepest levels, mindfulness leads us to recall that we are that open space and that we can literally remember, or unite, with it.

So where does hardship fit into all this? Remember that some synonyms for the first skandha are “panic,” “bewilderment,” and “fear.” The first skandha is what gave birth to samsara in the first place, and this therefore is what we can experience near the end of the path. As we get closer to the truth of our nonexistence we are getting closer to panic, bewilderment, and fear. Knowing that this might lie ahead on the path is important in understanding and expecting hardship.

Seeing through the skandhas begins with frustration at the level of the fifth skandha and ends with fear at the level of the first. This is what happens *near* the end of the path, but not at the end itself. It can also happen in brief moments at any point on the path. At the end of the path, lying beyond these defenses, are the noble qualities of enlightenment, infinite wisdom, compassion, and power. This is the view that keeps us going forward and that will cut through any panic and fear.

To summarize: we began the worldly path with an insane reaction to space, and we must end the path by facing that insanity. We return to face our samsaric roots. The skandha of form was the ego’s first attempt to shield itself from the truth of its insubstantiality, and now it is the ego’s last attempt to keep us away from this devastating truth.

When our meditation is boring and frustrating, that is not a bad sign but a good one. We are starting to penetrate the fourth and fifth skandhas and beginning to frustrate their mechanism. When our meditation is starting to freak us out, that is not a bad sign but a good one. We are starting to enter the deeper skandhas and approaching the truth. When we feel like we are about to lose our mind, that can mean we are getting close to gaining real sanity.

Working with the Skandhas

*It is painful to cast off our own scales, and the dragons guarding
the way are fierce. It requires the inspiration of angels
it requires diving into the ocean of tears*

—JACK KORNFELD, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*

HOW DO WE WORK with the five skandhas? They can seem so abstract and ironically impersonal. The first thing is to become familiar with them. This familiarity applies to both the relative and absolute levels. In meditation we initially become familiar with our relative sense of self; we discover and become familiar with the skandhas. We start with what is most available, which is consciousness itself, the fifth skandha. Trungpa Rinpoche says,

The practice of meditation is to see the transparency of this shield [of the five skandhas]. But we cannot immediately start with the basic ignorance itself; that would be like trying to push a wall down all at once. If we want to take this wall down, we must take it down brick by brick; we start with immediately available material, a stepping stone. So the practice of meditation starts with the emotions and thoughts.⁸²

In meditation we are introduced to the bricks of the ego at the level of the fifth skandha, and we become familiar with how we put all

these bricks together. Meditation introduces us to the fifth skandha by providing contrast. If we just look at the ceaseless movement of our mind, we are not meditating. We are indulging, or maybe witnessing, our thoughts. We need the contrast against which our moving mind can be observed, and this contrast is generated by giving the meditator a stable object upon which to focus, usually the breath, body, or some other reference. That reference point then becomes the canvas upon which the moving mind can more easily be seen. By being told to keep our mind still, we more easily recognize its movement. The fifth skandha now stands out.

Meditation is elegant in that it goes directly back to the first skandha, form, as a way to work with the skandhas. We use the root of the ego to uproot the ego. With meditation we are learning how to relate to form properly. Instead of spinning mindlessly out of control from the ground of form and giving birth to the remaining four skandhas, we return mindfully to this ground as a way to work with our unstable mind. The original sin is not the first skandha per se but our pathetic relationship to it.

In the normal operations of the ego, we only touch into the first skandha here and there, just long enough to feel its security. We spend most of the time in our thinking minds, in skandhas two through five. We touch into the forms of the world just long enough to set off a cascade of commentary about them. We perceive something and then run with it into endless judgment and internal gossip.

So the problem is not with the first skandha but our partial experience of it. The first skandha is the ever-present world of form, and this is what we return to in meditation. We literally and figuratively come to our senses, which can perceive only the present world of form. We can't hear the past nor see the future; our five senses are locked into nowness, so we use the natural wisdom of our sensory contact with form as a way to work with the skandhas altogether. This, of course, is the practice of mindfulness, having a mind-full-of-nowness, a mind-full-of-form.

In meditation, the instruction is to be with our body and breath, to be *fully* with form. This is how we frustrate the higher skandhas,

especially the endless chatter of the fifth skandha, which like shameless paparazzi, makes its career out of endless commentary about form. Because of the higher skandhas, we live in our heads and **not** in reality, but by returning *fully* to the world of form, we boycott the higher skandhas and come back to our roots in direct experience.

Partial experience is what generates the skandha of form in the **first** place. It is our inability to experience space properly that causes **us** to freeze it into form, and it is our subsequent inability to experience form completely that causes us to slide into the higher skandhas and into full-blown confusion. If we can be fully present with *whatever* arises—space, form, feeling, perception, formation, or consciousness—we will discover that complete experience to be nondual.

This is why the idea of descending back through the skandhas is merely provisional. We do not need to work our way back to the space prior to the first skandha, for if we plunge directly into whatever experience presents itself, we will discover that space in whatever arises. We start and finish where we are. As Jakusho Kwong puts it, we need a path not to go from here to there but to go from here to here.

Remember that the “absolute experience of duality is itself the experience of nonduality.” It is therefore our half-hearted relationship to the world of form, not form itself, that is the problem. As Francesca Fremantle puts it, “The skandha of form refers to this interface, this sphere of [half-hearted] relationship between subject and object, not to matter or material existence itself. Form is very basic and straightforward: just simple, direct contact between the senses and their objects, without any interpretations, reactions, or preconceptions [without the commentary of the higher skandhas].”⁸³ The way out, again, is to dive in: to return fully to the world of form.

But most of us want out of the world of form; that is why many of us enter the spiritual path in the first place. We long for ascent into heaven not a descent into earth. For the ego, heaven is the culminating head space of the fifth skandha, so it is a rude awakening when the spiritual path turns us directly into the world of form and smack into that which we thought we could escape. It’s that nasty u-turn again.

This is where meditators get stuck. The minute we leave our body

in meditation and ascend into the false sanctuary of our mind, we are off the path and lost in our head. I know meditators who have been practicing for twenty years, and they are completely lost in mental space. This is not the sacred space prior to the first skandha, but a fabricated and indulged space that creates a ready avenue for escape. They are “spaced-out” in a subtle and sophisticated way. They have become disembodied practitioners, spinning around in their version of what meditation should be.

Instead of synchronizing mind and body, their meditation is about leaving the world of bodies altogether. But successful meditation means a return to form, which starts with a return to our body. Meditation is not an out-of-body experience, which is why every authentic practice begins with, and sustains, some form of mindfulness. Mindfulness is what brings us down to earth, and it is here that we will finally find spirit. We are starting to head into the fruition of the path, (discussed more fully in part 3).

In the last year of my long retreat, I dreamt I was with His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa, the head of the tradition I follow. The dream turned into a lucid dream, which meant that I suddenly realized I was dreaming. I was awake in my dream and I asked His Holiness, “How can I serve you?” I expected him to say, “You must write books,” or “You must spend your life in retreat.” Instead he said, “Change my diapers.” His answer came as a real shock, one that woke me up from the dream. It was a command to plunge into the earth. I always held highfalutin ideas of what it means to be spiritual, and the Karmapa slammed me into the ground to wake me up.

☸ Relative Familiarity

We can use the gist of the five skandhas to summarize the entire path. The first half of the path is to become familiar with your relative mind. Get to know your ego, your five skandhas, who you *think* you are. This is not always pleasant. You discover how wild your relative mind is and how hard it is to sit still. Once you settle down and see through the rough movements of mind, the more subtle

and repressed elements bubble up. This is also challenging because the reason these elements were repressed in the first place is because you did not want to deal with them. All sorts of junk is percolating beneath the surface of consciousness, and meditation brings it up. As Trungpa Rinpoche puts it: meditation isn't a sedative, it's a laxative.

It needs to come up, and we need to become familiar with it because it is the silent engine that drives our confused lives. Lama Shenpen Hookham says, "At first, the truths we discover about ourselves might be far from comforting. That is why it is important to be committed to truth itself, whether or not it is comforting, if we want ultimate liberation."⁸⁴

This is where meditation meets therapy. Even though all thoughts eventually self-liberate, they can cause unnecessary hurt until they do. A therapist can help us become familiar with the psychic abscesses that are being drained and ease the liberating process.

Typologies like the Enneagram can also help. A good typology is a method for becoming familiar with and befriending every aspect of our relative self. But it's not easy. When I discovered my type in the Enneagram, I was startled by its accuracy and offended by its insight. I'm not special, I'm just a "five." It was like looking into a mirror and seeing the pimples I try to hide.

This is also where intimate spiritual relationships can help. Our lover can provide a powerful mirror that reveals our blind spots—if we are willing to take a look. Short of living with a guru, a deep relationship can strip us down and accelerate our path by exposing our damaging habitual patterns.

These painful revelations are tremendous blessings. Before we can *discover* who we truly are, we have to discover who we are not; before the sun can be revealed, we have to remove the obscuring clouds. The typologies, the neuroses, the painful thoughts and emotions are not who we really are, they are the constructs we have built up to create the facade of our relative self, the face we present to ourselves and the world.

Becoming familiar with the dark clouds and shadows constitutes the first half of the path. As Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche says, before

we can become buddha, we have to become human. Before we wake up, we have to realize we are asleep. This level of seeing involves hardship and demands real warriorship. Trungpa Rinpoche writes,

Anyone who is interested in finding out about oneself, and anyone who is interested in practicing meditation is basically a warrior.

We have a fear of facing ourselves. That is the obstacle. Experiencing the innermost core of our existence is very embarrassing to a lot of people. A lot of people turn to something that they hope will liberate them without their having to face themselves. That is impossible. We can't do that. We have to be honest with ourselves. We have to see our gut, our excrement, our most undesirable parts. We have to see them. That is the foundation of warriorship, basically speaking. Whatever is there, we have to face it, we have to look at it, study it, work with it and practice meditation with it.

Once we decide to look at ourselves, we may experience ourselves as wretched. . . . Whatever arises, we look at ourselves, either based on hope or fear, whatever there may be. The important point is looking at ourselves, finding ourselves, facing ourselves, giving up our privacy and inhibition. Once we have done that, we turn to the good side of things. We begin to realize that we have something in us which is fundamentally, basically good—very good. It actually transcends the notion of good or bad. Something worthwhile, wholesome and healthy exists in us. But don't jump the gun and try to get hold of that first. First, let's look. If we actually face ourselves properly and fully, we will find that something else exists there, something beyond facing ourselves.

The starting point is acknowledging that some kind of goodness exists in us. It is necessary to take that arro-

gant attitude, positively speaking. There is some feeling of upliftedness. We are worthy people, and we have something going for us. We are not all that totally wretched. Of course, we do have the wretched aspect that we have to face and look at. That is absolutely necessary in order to realize the other part. But they don't actually interact as counterparts. It's simply that you go through your clouds, and then you see your sun. That is the basic approach, the basic idea we should take towards the worthiness of our existence. That . . . is the warrior's philosophy of looking at ourselves.⁸⁵

🌸 Absolute Familiarity

After you become familiar with your relative self, you see through it and are introduced to your true nature. This is the sun behind the clouds, and it is completely selfless. Becoming familiar with your absolute nature constitutes the second half of the path.

Earlier we introduced the five paths, and the first two paths, the Path of Accumulation and the Path of Juncture, are where **we** become familiar with who we are not. These are the “cloudy” paths. They purify the clouds and open the way to the sun. Practitioners on these two paths still think that things exist. They have not yet become noble.

The third path, the pivot point in the middle of the five paths, is the Path of Seeing. This is a very short path and constitutes the moment when we finally cut through the clouds and see the sun at our core. It is seeing emptiness. This first stage of recognition is called “Joyous” because seeing who we really are brings great joy. Seeing that all our problems are fundamentally empty is also joyful. This is how we transform hardship into joy at the level of the Second Turning.

When we leave this moment of discovery we enter the Path of Meditation, or Familiarization, the fourth path. Clouds still appear, but for the first time they are really seen as clouds. Thoughts and

emotions still arise, and things still appear, but they no longer seduce us. The journey is now to become more and more familiar with our sun. When we completely realize who we are, we enter the fifth Path of No More Learning and become a buddha. There is nothing left to learn about ourselves. We have seen through all the clouds and completely identify with the sun. We wake up to who we are.

Even before the breakthrough into the Path of Seeing, we can glimpse our true nature as the clouds part along the first half of the path. It's still mostly cloudy, but the sun peeks through. Depending on how we relate to that flash of illumination, it can be either liberating or blinding. The light is so bright in contrast to the clouds that it can be terrifying.

This is frightening because the sun is the direct experience of egolessness or emptiness. If we relate to it for what it is, it becomes a moment of joy, but since we are still on the first half of the path, which is based on the ego as the central reference point, we tend to refer this egoless experience to the ego. And the ego has no choice but to relate to egolessness as a death threat. Our heart starts pounding, and we may feel like we are about to go crazy. We are getting warm. We are starting to feel our sun. Liberation is not liberation *to* the self, but liberation *from* the self, and the self responds by trying to pull us away.

Once we really see emptiness and do not merely glimpse it, we can bask in the warmth and joy that is our new (nonreferential) reference point along the Paths of Seeing and Meditation. This can bring about a second level of fear, one that is often surprising. The first level of fear is the shock of our nonexistence, the fear of emptiness. The second level of fear is the fear of our fullness. We are afraid of our luminosity, our brilliance. We are intimidated by our inner wealth and natural resources, the force with which our true nature shines. Abraham Maslow writes that "we are generally afraid to become that which we glimpse in our most perfect moments," and John Welwood comments, "no doubt because our larger being threatens us in many ways." He goes on to say, "If we were to open to it fully, perhaps it would disrupt our cozy little habits and throw our familiar, small

identity into question . . . [we] are primitives in regard to our larger being.”⁸⁶

We have seen how hard it is to embrace our shadows; it is just as hard to embrace our light. It takes courage to cut through the clouds and discover our sun but also endless bravery to display its radiance. Discovering our larger being, the luminosity within, is our journey through part 3.