

Comprehending Clinging

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Our duty with regard to suffering and stress is to comprehend it. Comprehending means putting an end to our passion, aversion, and delusion around it. In the first noble truth, the Buddha defines suffering and stress, in its short version, as clinging to the five aggregates. When we hear that, we tend to focus on the aggregates—that we need to comprehend them. Which is true, we do, but we also have to comprehend clinging.

In fact, clinging is the real problem. That's the activity that's suffering. The aggregates on their own aren't the problem. The clinging makes them a problem. So it's good to think about clinging: what it means and how to develop comprehension for it.

There are four types altogether: sensuality clinging, view clinging, habit-and-practice clinging, and doctrine-of-self clinging.

Sensuality clinging has to do with our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, planning for sensual pleasures, setting our hearts on sensual pleasures. In other words, clinging for what we want in terms of sensuality.

View clinging has to do with our ideas about what actually is out there, what's possible in the world, how the world is constructed, how it works. Of course, this relates to sensuality in the sense that if you're going to look for sensuality, you want to have an idea of how the world is constructed so you can get what you want out of it.

Habit-and-precept clinging has to do with your sense of what you should do, given the way the world is.

And then, doctrine-of-self clinging has to do with how you define yourself in the midst of all this. The self, here, is the negotiator between your sense of what should be done, what you want to do, and what's possible.

So these four kinds of clinging all work together. Sometimes view clinging seems to be the strongest. We have an idea that the world is the way it is. People who see a supernatural side to the world say, "There's something out there that gives meaning to physical events." People who don't see that dimension say, "There's no meaning." And both sides say, "The other side is not playing fair." The materialists think the super-naturalists are dealing in magical thinking; the super-naturalists think the materialists have no moral values at all. So here's a case where habit-

and-practice clinging comes in and plays a role in our idea of what actually is out there. So our ideas of what we want, of what is, or how things work, and of what we should do influence one another in various ways, but the central one, of course, is your sense of who you are. This is where you get invested.

You want happiness and you've decided you're going to play by certain rules, or you've decided the world is a certain way and that's how you're going to base your decisions on how you act. For instance, if you're going to give up sensuality, you have to have good reasons. You're going to cling to a view of the world, or to a sense of what should and should not be done, that will explain to you why it's better to give up sensuality, why it's a better trade to give it up. Other people have decided that sensuality is everything and don't want to hear about worldviews that would downplay the importance of sensuality, or would raise questions about the skillfulness or unskillfulness of their actions as they search for sensual pleasures.

All these ways of clinging, as the Buddha said, are suffering. This means that the strategies we use for figuring out how to be happy are our suffering. And that's why so much of his teaching goes against the grain. But he doesn't tell us to abandon the idea of happiness all together. He says simply that there are better ways of finding it and they'll involve a particular set of views: right view about action and its powers, right view about the fact that there is rebirth and there are other levels of being, and your rebirth on different levels of being is dependent on your actions. This much of a view, the Buddha says, you hold on to as your working hypothesis.

The same with habits and practices: You develop the precepts; you develop the practice of concentration. These are things you should do, should develop. And you also try to develop a sense of yourself as competent, responsible, and able to benefit from these practices. As the Buddha says, when you see things as not-self, it's not simply to say, "That's the way they are, so I've got to give up on them." It's because, he says, when you try to hold on to things that are not really yourself, you're going to suffer, but if you learn how to let go, it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. So there's a residual sense of self in there that you use strategically, as motivation.

But to adopt these right forms of clinging—notice that views, habits and practices, and a sense of the self are there, but nothing about sensuality on the path—you also have to clear away your other forms of attachment. Sensuality, of course, is the big one. It's going to pull you off if you're not careful.

This is why you have to look carefully at its allure and its drawbacks. There are pleasures, the Buddha says, that come from the senses but they come with a lot of drawbacks. To gain sensual pleasures you have to work hard. Sometimes your work doesn't succeed, and you see yourself as a failure. Sometimes it does succeed and then you've got treasures you've got to maintain and protect because other people want them. It's because of our sensuality that we get into conflicts. We see conflict all around us, all because of sensuality.

The same with views: The Buddha wants you to see what their allure is and what their drawbacks are. The allure of a particular view about the world is that you figure out you can use that view, or that sense of reality, in order to gain your happiness, but then the Buddha has you look at what kind of actions you do based on that view. For instance, if you hold to the view that there really is no right or wrong in the world, there are simply social conventions, or that your actions have no impact on the world, on your life, or there's nothing after death, you're going to behave in a lot of unskillful ways that will lead to some very unskillful destinations or undesirable destinations.

And even the best possible destinations that you can get even from acting on mundane right view have their drawbacks as well. You get to a higher level of heaven and then you fall. It's very ironic. We work hard, hard, hard to be skillful in our actions. Then, when the rewards come, we get stuck on the rewards and become unskillful again. In some ways, the round of saṃsāra is like a sick joke. People behave well, they gain their rewards, then they behave poorly around the rewards, and then they fall. So you've got to see that even mundane right view has its limitations.

As for habits and practices, you see a lot of the ways that people behave that really are harmful—if not to themselves, then harmful to other people, or harmful to both. Based on their ideas of right and wrong—what they should do—they end up doing a lot of unskillful things—especially with the idea that “ends justify the means.” But you begin to realize that the ends that you gain, here in the world, never really last; all we have are means.

So that sense of *ought* that goes around habits and practices: You have to call that into question—especially the *oughts* that lead you to do unskillful things for what you think is a noble cause.

Underlying all of this, of course, is your sense of you, the person who's invested in these different forms of clinging. And you have to look into to see, well, what exactly is this you? Look at the identities that would pull you away from the path and notice that they're simply

constructs made out of form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness: things that come and go. It's like building a house out of frozen meat. As long as it's frozen, you're okay, but then when it starts to melt, you're stuck with a huge mess.

So you apply those perceptions to things that would pull you away from the path until the path is really solid. Only then do you apply the same perceptions to the path itself: Who is this person doing the path? That, too, is a construct. Of course, this is the last step, as you leave the raft and step off onto the other shore. In the meantime, you've got to learn to look carefully at the different senses of what you want, the way you feel the world works, and how you feel you should act in the world, and this "you" who's invested in all these things. It's the investment that makes us cling.

That's why the Buddha said, of all the forms of clinging, doctrine-of-self clinging is the strongest and the deepest, and the one that makes all the difference in the world. He noted that some other religions had some comprehension of sensuality clinging, view clinging, and habit-and-practice clinging, but because they didn't have any understanding about how we cling to our ideas of self, those other religions didn't have any awakened people at all.

So look at the way you're invested in your views, in your ideas of what should be done, in your desires, and learn how to question those clings: Are they really for your best interest?

It's when you understand the allure of these various forms of clinging and can compare that allure with the drawbacks, that's when you comprehend them. That's when you comprehend the suffering and can let go of the cause. And that's when you find there's something much better.