

Antidotes for Clinging

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There are some places in the Pali Canon where the Buddha says that the five aggregates are stressful, and others where he says the five *clinging*-aggregates are stressful. It's important to notice here that he's talking about two different kinds of stress. The sense in which the five aggregates are stressful is related to stress in terms of the three characteristics. They're inconstant and so they're stressful. That's simply the way they are, whether you hold on to them or not. But if you don't grab on to these things, your mind doesn't suffer. It's when you grab on, it's when you cling, that stress comes into the mind. You create a clinging-aggregate. You create a connection. This is stress in terms of the four noble truths. Wherever there's craving, there can be clinging, and the clinging to the aggregates is the stress that really weighs on the mind.

When we practice, our main focus is on the stress in the four noble truths, the stress that weighs on the mind. If you don't cling to the things that are stressful, then they can be as stressful as they want, but the stress doesn't come in and weigh you down. It's like picking up a heavy object. If you just leave it there on the ground, it doesn't weigh you down. It weighs the same whether you're picking it up or not. When you pick it up it's fifty pounds; when you leave it on the ground it's fifty pounds. The difference is that the fifty pounds is suddenly on top of you when you pick it up, and that's when you suffer. That's precisely the stress the Buddha is focusing on. That's the important one to notice.

Always try to be clear about this distinction. The real problem isn't the aggregates, it's the clinging. And the word *clinging* has a double meaning. It can also mean the act of feeding on something. Where we cling is where we look to feed for happiness. We look to the five aggregates for food. We munch them down, and then they munch *us* down. We feed on the form of the body, we feed on feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and sensory consciousness. When these things are pleasant, they're not too heavy. But they can turn around and turn unpleasant very quickly. They gobble us up, for we've opened the way for them to get to us. Once you start clinging to the good ones, you start clinging to the bad ones as well, because that's where you're looking for food.

So it's important to understand clinging so that you can put an end to it. As the Buddha said, there are four kinds. There's sensual clinging, clinging to views, clinging to habits and practices, and then clinging to doctrines of the self. All of

these hover around the five aggregates. They're different ways of clinging to the five aggregates. And the Buddha has a different cure for each.

Sometimes you hear that the deepest, most underlying form of clinging is the sense of self identity that you build around things. If you learn how not to have any sense of self identity, there you are: You've taken care of all the other forms of clinging. Sometimes you hear that clinging to views is the basic form of clinging. If you can deconstruct all your views, you'll be done with all the other forms of clinging as well. So you reason your way to seeing how you can't say that things exist, you can't say that things don't exist, or both, or neither. They're empty. That means that your sensual desire is empty, your habits and practices are empty, your doctrines of the self are empty. With everything empty like that, there's nothing to cling to. But that doesn't work either. After letting things go in this way, you'll find that your sensual desires weren't touched. You just turn around and pick them back up. So you have to realize that each kind of clinging has its own antidote.

For example, clinging to sensuality: When the Buddha talks about sensuality, he doesn't say that you're attached to sights or sounds. The word *kama*, or sensuality, here doesn't mean beautiful or desirable sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. It means the plans and intentions you have around these things. *That's* what we're really focused on. We're all attached to the ideas we have of the things we want, wanting them to be a certain way to give us pleasure. In other words, we're more attached to our dreams and plans about sensual pleasures than we are to the sensual pleasures themselves. This is simple enough to see. If you find your sensual desire thwarted in one area, you turn around and you focus it on something else. The desire is what we cling to. We cling to the plans that we make for sensual pleasure.

And what are these plans like? For the most part, they're pretty one-sided and sketchy. Say you have designs on somebody else's body. When you think about that person's body, there are only certain details that you think about. A lot of details you don't want to think about at all. Or when you think about a particular relationship, you think about only certain aspects of the relationship and not about others.

So the antidote here is to broaden your view, to see that your pursuit of pleasure in this way carries a lot of pain along with it. When the Buddha talks about the drawbacks of sensuality, he starts with the fact that in order to lead a sensual lifestyle, you've got to work. The work in and of itself is painful and wearisome. You work and work and work to build up wealth. Sometimes you gain it; sometimes you don't. Even when you do gain it, there's the fear that, as he says, thieves and kings will steal it—I like the way the Buddha always mentions kings and thieves in the same breath—water might wash it away, fire

might burn it, hateful heirs could take off with it. That can easily happen to your wealth. And as the Buddha points out, it's over sensuality that people fight. Parents fight with their children; children fight with their parents; brothers with sisters, sisters with brothers; husband with wife, wife with husband. And not just in the family: There are wars over sensual pleasures as well because we need to take wealth to pay for our passions, which are far greater than all the wealth in the world. That's how we end up going to war.

The Buddha goes down a long list of all the pains and sufferings tied up with this pursuit of our dreams of sensuality. So as you look at the pursuit of sensuality in its entirety, you realize how much pain and suffering it involves. You don't have to look too far. This contemplation we have of the requisites every day, thinking about food, clothing, shelter, and medicine: Just the fact that we have a body makes us a burden on other people. So think about that. Every time your mind starts spinning a web of sensual desire, tell yourself: "If you're going to spin a web, spin the full web. Try to encompass the whole picture."

Like that daydream that Ajaan Lee reports in his autobiography, from the time he was planning to disrobe: At first it starts out really nice; he even gets a nobleman's daughter for his wife. But then the reality principle starts kicking in. Eventually, because she's a nobleman's daughter, she's not up to the hard work that's required in marrying a peasant's son. She dies and leaves him with a child to raise. He gets a second wife. The second wife has a kid of her own and starts playing favorites, abusing the first kid. And so on down the line. When we bring in reality like this, it helps cut through a lot of our delusions around sensuality, a lot of our attachment to sensual designs, sensual plans, sensual dreams.

Or you can contemplate the body, in all its parts. You can think of a beautiful body, but when you think of the parts inside, you say *wuuuh*. Just a few micrometers below the skin there's all this other stuff, and it's inextricably connected with the things you like. Suppose you lust for somebody. You don't like the idea of their intestines, but if you took their intestines out, would you like that person without any intestines? It's not worth taking either way—with or without a liver, with or without a stomach.

So when you think in these ways, you begin to realize that your sensual plans and desires are really unrealistic, really misleading. They make you half blind so that they can take you down a path to suffering. Realizing this helps cut through the sensuality. You see how arbitrary all these dreams are, that you can't rely on them. That's what helps you let them go.

As for clinging to views, the Buddha has you follow a similar process, but with different details. The process is that he has you look at the drawbacks that come from clinging to a view, one of the major drawbacks being that you inevitably get into arguments with other people. But more than that, the Buddha

has you look carefully at the things you have views about. This is where the details differ, and the analysis goes into more technical terms. Your views come down to the question of what exists and what doesn't exist, he says, but when you actually look at your sensory experience, you just see things arising and passing away. As you focus on the arising, the idea of non-existence doesn't occur to you. As you focus on the passing away, the idea of existence doesn't occur to you. You realize that the basic building blocks of experience, when you look at them just on the level of arising and passing away, don't provide a foundation for the very basic polarities of existing and not-existing. On top of that, any views you build are sketches based on not looking at things very carefully. So the Buddha has you look very carefully at the process of what it's like to experience things. When you see that views really can't express the truth about things, and that holding onto them is going to cause you to suffer, you can cut through your attachment to them.

As for habits and practices, he first has you look at the actual habits or precepts and practices you're attached to. The attachment here is to the idea that if you follow certain rules and you're a good little boy, a good little girl, that's all you have to do. God will be happy with you or the universe will approve of you or whatever. So the Buddha has people look directly at their habits and practices together with their results, some of which are actively harmful. Back in his days, sacrifices were believed to be a way to find true happiness. So he talked about looking at the misery that comes through the sacrifices, not only for the animals sacrificed but also for the people forced to labor in getting the animals killed. Self-torture as a form of austerity was also a popular practice in some circles. So he had you look at the pain that comes from it, to see that it doesn't really lead anywhere. It doesn't really help cleanse the mind.

So in this way he'd get people to abandon harmful habits and practices, and replace them with good habits and good practices: the habits we adopt as part of our virtue, the practices we follow in the practice of meditation. But eventually he says to watch out: If you're not careful, you're going to create a sense of conceit around these things, the pride that comes sometimes when "I follow the precepts and you don't," or "My jhana's better than yours." The way to get beyond that attachment is not to break the precepts or drop your practice of jhana. It's simply to continue with those practices while learning how not to develop a sense of conceit around them. Realize that you're doing these things not to make yourself better than other people, but simply because they work in cleansing the mind.

Finally there's clinging to doctrines of self. This doesn't mean just the view that "I have a self," whatever your sense of self might be. It also means clinging to the view that "I have no self." Thinking in either way, the Buddha said, leads

you into a thicket of views that will get you entangled. So, as with the cure for clinging to views, the Buddha has you take the polarity of existence or nonexistence and put it aside. When the issue of existing or not-existing is a non-issue, the idea of a self existing or not existing is a non-issue as well. Instead, the Buddha has you look at things simply in terms of the four noble truths. Where is stress arising? What is the cause of that stress? What's the path to the end of that stress? As you divide up your experience in those terms, the whole issue of "who you are" or "who you're not" just gets put aside. You're more focused on what you're doing that's causing stress, learning how to comprehend the stress, learning how to abandon the cause through developing the path, so that ultimately you can realize the end of stress, the end of suffering. That's the way out of that type of clinging.

So when you find the mind clinging, weighing itself down with its attachment to the aggregates, try to be clear about exactly which kind of clinging you're suffering from and what the antidote is, what the medicine that the Buddha prescribed, because it's different in each case. There's no one blanket cure to cover every form of clinging. You've got to develop your discernment from many angles, develop discernment with many facets. Essentially every approach involves seeing things in terms of being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, but those principles get applied in different ways for each type of clinging.

So try to keep this list of medicines in mind and apply them as appropriate. That way you put yourself in a position where you're living in a world that's stressful but you're not pulling the stress inside. You can live surrounded by inconstancy, stress, and not-self, but not suffer from it.