

## *Clinging & Feeding*

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When the Buddha defined suffering or stress in the four noble truths, he gave lots of examples and then summarized them all as the five clinging-aggregates. Notice he didn't say five aggregates. It's the clinging-aggregates that are suffering. It's because we cling to them that the mind suffers. The aggregates may have stress simply in the fact they arise and pass away, but that doesn't really afflict the mind unless the mind clings to them. So we have to understand what this clinging is and how we can get past it.

First off, it's good to notice that the Pali word for clinging, *upadana*, also means taking sustenance. For example, when a plant grows, it requires sustenance, *upadana*, from the soil. Fire requires sustenance from its fuel. So in clinging to something, we're actually trying to feed off of it. As the Buddha points out in many places, this act of feeding really is stressful. And it's a central part of taking on the identity of being a being that you've got to feed. You feed on material food but you also feed on emotional and mental food as well. The act of clinging is a mental kind of feeding.

One of the purposes of the practice is to teach us how to get past our hunger for these things, the part of the mind that really likes to feed. In many places, the Buddha talks about developing a sense of *nibbida*, which can be translated as disenchantment but also, in the stronger cases, disgust or revulsion. In other words, you see you've been eating a certain kind of food and you just can't take it anymore. You lose all taste for that food. That's why the Buddha teaches perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, so that we can actually look at what we're eating and realize it's not worth it.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about a beautiful liquid that tastes like honey. It's very attractive, very tasty. You keep eating the honey and then you discover it has poison in it. So the next time you see it, would you want to eat it? The knowledge that it's poisonous would be enough to make you not want to even touch it to your lips. This is what the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self are intended for: to develop that sense of no longer wanting to eat these things, seeing that they have their dangers and that they don't provide the satisfaction that you thought that they would.

But those aren't the only perceptions he has you apply. Sometimes there's the perception of seeing these things as a wound, a dart, cancer, a void, a dissolution. In other words, you can use any kind of perception that helps you see that when

you really look at these things carefully, they're not worth eating, they're not worth taking in.

So that's what we're doing here, as we practice: We're looking carefully at our eating habits. And then, as part of the path, we're trying to feed ourselves on better things. We actually take the aggregates and feed on them to some extent, but it's a different kind of feeding. We take them as the path. We convert our form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness into a state of concentration. We use the fabrication of thoughts to develop wisdom, the perceptions that the Buddha recommends to develop wisdom—the purpose of that wisdom being to develop dispassion and disenchantment. Then we feed the mind with conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, all of which are good food for the mind. These are the things that strengthen us, so that we can manage the path.

So the Buddha doesn't try to starve us right from the start. He simply tells us to take a different approach to our feeding. Feed on good food first until the mind is strong enough so that it doesn't need any food anymore. Then, as part of the process, he has you look very carefully at what is this feeding that you do: How do you feed? This is part of the duty with regard to stress and suffering, which is to comprehend it. You want to comprehend the feeding, the clinging, until you lose your taste for it.

The Buddha actually identifies four ways in which we cling to the aggregates. The first is through sensual passion. We like beautiful things. That's the form, here, but we also like thinking about how much we're going to enjoy the beautiful things that look nice and the things that sound nice and smell nice and taste nice and feel nice when we touch them. Those are perceptions or fabrications. So sensuality isn't just over material things. The primary issue in sensuality is that the mind likes to think about these things, over and over again. It can obsess about food, sex, and whatever else the pleasures might be, for hours on end. That's what it's actually addicted to: obsessing about the thoughts.

This is why, as an antidote, the Buddha provides all those negative images of sensuality to think about. What do you actually get out of sensuality? He compares sensuality to a bead of honey on a knife blade. You want to lick the bead of honey off the blade, but you'd cut your tongue. Or carrying a torch against the wind: You like the light from the torch, but the fact that the wind is blowing it at you means you're going to get burned. Or of a man up in the tree eating the fruits of the tree but someone else comes along who doesn't want to climb the tree so he decides to cut it down. In other words, you have certain sensual pleasures but other people want those pleasures, too, and they're going to destroy you in the

process of getting them.

So the Buddha wants you to reflect on how dangerous and harmful these pleasures are. There's a similar image of the hawk: It's got a piece of meat and other hawks and kites and other raptors come up and fight it to snatch that piece of meat away. If the original hawk doesn't let go, it's going to get torn to pieces, too. So there are lots and lots of images the Buddha has to impress on you how much danger there is in sensuality.

That's one of his antidotes for that kind of feeding.

Another way that we cling to the aggregates is through views: views about ourselves, views about the world. The Buddha doesn't mention politics but that's certainly one way in which people cling to views. Having views creates a lot of suffering because once you cling to views, you start getting into arguments. This is one of the reasons the Buddha was so selective about the questions he answered, because a lot of questions lead just to more clinging and more conflict. A lot of those issues are things you simply cannot resolve, like the origin of the world or the speculations about the nature of the cosmos. He said you can go crazy thinking of these things. Or the issues about who you are, what you really are, what a person is: The Buddha never answered those questions.

Now, there are some views that are useful, like right view: dealing with the issue of stress and its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Those are views that you have to hold on to as part of the path. They're like the raft that will take you across the river. Once you get to the other side, you can let it go. But there are lots of other views that you really don't need to have opinions on.

This, I found when I went to Thailand, was one of the more liberating parts about becoming a monk. Back when I was in college, you were expected to have opinions on every topic that people might bring up. Whereas over there, being a monk, it wasn't necessary. In fact, it was frowned on—lots of unnecessary discussions. So you want to focus your views on things that are really conducive to the end of stress, and not hold on to the kind of views that just keep you tied down.

The third kind of clinging is to habits and practices. The word *habit*, here, is the translation of *sila*. Sometimes it's translated as precepts or rites and rituals but it's more than any of those terms. This kind of clinging is basically the idea that any habitual way of acting will, in and of itself, guarantee your awakening or guarantee that you're going to be pure or superior or put an end to suffering, simply by following rules. Now, there are rules and practices that we follow. We practice concentration. We follow the precepts but again, it's with the purpose of giving rise to insight. The rules and the precepts and the practices, in and of

themselves, don't constitute awakening. They form a basis for it, but you've got to practice in a way that you're not simply following the rules and hoping that by putting the mind through a sausage factory you're going to come out with enlightenment, without having to use any of your own powers of observation, without adjusting things, without testing things and experimenting.

So again, you'll want to look at the habits that are actually getting in the way and your *attitudes* toward habits and precepts and practices that are getting in the way of letting go. You're going to have to let go of them as much as you can because they do tie you up. Here again, the Buddha wants you to see how much you get tied up by habitual ways of doing things. Then he teaches you better habits that will get you to a point where you don't need the habits anymore.

The Buddha talks about how the person who gains the first stage of awakening, where attachment to habits and practices is abandoned, is still virtuous. When you're no longer attached to your habits, it's not that you'll do anything at all. You realize the harm that comes from breaking the precepts, but the precepts don't become part of your identity. I think that's the main point the Buddha's getting at. You don't exalt yourself and disparage others over your precepts, saying, "Well, they're not as virtuous as I am."

When I was a small, my mother was the president of the PTA of the little school I went to. The principal of the school, who was also my first grade teacher, would sometimes stop by the house after school and have discussions with my mother. One day, after their discussion was over, Mom came and reported at the dinner table that the teacher, who was Catholic, had made a remark that "Well, if being Catholic doesn't make you better than other people, what good is it?" I, of course, had been raised to believe that being Catholic didn't make you any better than anybody else. I was surprised that my teacher could say something that even I, as a first grader, could see was stupid.

So while we're practicing, we're not here to be better than other people. It's more as if we have a disease and we're trying to apply the right medicine. The fact that other people aren't applying their medicine doesn't make you better than them. You're not doing it to make yourself better than they are. You're doing it to make yourself well.

Once you have your first taste of awakening, you see that the precepts are an important part of the path, but there's more to the path than just that. You realize that you're following the precepts not to make yourself better than other people, but simply because that's what you need to do if you don't want to suffer.

The fourth kind of clinging is clinging to doctrines of the self, beliefs about what you are. Do you exist? Do you not exist? That's part of the series of questions

the Buddha says don't deserve any attention: Do I exist? Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Then there are the related questions: When a fully awakened person dies, does that person exist? Or not exist? Both? Or neither? Those questions are based on the attempt to identify if there's a core identity that survives into the experience of awakening.

This type of clinging is probably one of the strongest. We have our ideas about who we are and we hold on to them tight. When you identify with something, as the Buddha says, then when that thing begins to change, you suffer. Just look at aging, illness, and death: If you're identifying with the body, you're going to suffer for sure. You can identify with your feelings. You can identify with your perceptions and thought constructs. As your mind stops remembering things so well, there's going to be a lot of suffering.

One of the important steps in the practice is to begin to see that your sense of self is an activity. You have a strategy for trying to make yourself happy and you create a sense of self around the aggregates based on two things. One is your idea of who is it that's going to receive the pleasure you're trying to create. And second, your idea of what you have under your power that you can use to create that pleasure. It's like a little child learning that this shape that appears in its field of vision every now and then is actually a hand that it controls. Then it starts using that hand to grasp things and its instinctive reaction is: Grasp it, then you put it in your mouth. You want to see what's good to eat.

It's around that kind of activity that your sense of self develops: both the self as the producer and the self as the consumer. As with the other forms of clinging, the Buddha has you learn how to use your strategy of self to get yourself on the path. The self as producer: the thought that "If other people can do this, why can't I?" You look at yourself to see what qualities you need in order to practice and so you try to develop them. You're very aware. As the Buddha said, you want to be aware of your conviction, your virtue, your generosity, your discernment, your level of learning, your level of ingenuity. Have you developed these skills to a point where they really can lead to awakening?

As for the self as consumer: If you ever feel tempted to leave the path, you remind yourself, "Hey, I got on this path to begin with because I was suffering. I wanted true happiness. Don't I love myself? Don't I really want true happiness? Or am I going to let myself be content with second best—or not even second best, way down at the bottom of the list?"

These are skillful ways of using your sense of self, when you realize you have to be responsible for your actions and develop a sense of heedfulness, realizing that if you don't act properly, you're going to suffer. These all require a sense of self that's

healthy and mature. It can take you a fair way on the path.

But it doesn't take you all the way. You learn how to see things simply as causes and effects, and you begin to see that certain actions get in the way of your progress. So you learn how to abandon those actions or replace them with better ones until you see the only action that's standing in the way is the fact that you're identifying a sense of self that's experiencing these things. You try and locate where that is, where it's centered. When you see where it's located and how it forms a nucleus for this state of becoming, in which you having an idea of who you are or where you are, what kind of world you're in: Once you can see that happening, you can drop it. That's the end of the matter. That's the end of all clinging.

So this is how the Buddha teaches the issue of clinging, how he explains suffering and stress. This is how we come to comprehend it. In other words, he has you look at your feeding habits for the mind and notice where they're unskillful and how you can replace them with more skillful feeding habits—particularly in terms of your views, your habits and practices, and your sense of who you are. You try to develop those in a skillful way, so that eventually they lead you to the point where you don't need them anymore. The mind is strong enough that it doesn't need to feed. That's when it really lets go, and there's no more clinging, no more feeding. That's the end of suffering—and it's total release. And as for the question of who's experiencing that release, Ajaan Suwat had a nice way of responding. He said, "When there's the experience of true release, it doesn't really matter to you who or what is experiencing it. The experience is enough in and of itself."