

## *Suffering is an Addiction*

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The Buddha defines suffering as clinging to the aggregates, which makes it sound like we're holding on to things, but we're actually holding on to actions—in other words, certain ways of doing things, certain ways of thinking that we just keep repeating over and over again even though they cause suffering. It's like an addiction. You hang on in spite of the suffering, in spite of the stress and drawbacks that are involved. Sometimes it's because you're afraid to change the way you act. Sometimes you can't think of another way to act. But as the Buddha said, if it weren't possible to abandon unskillful ways of acting and develop skillful ones in their place, he wouldn't have taught. So it is possible.

You have to hold that possibility in mind, and talk to all the members of your mind's committee, because some are very fearful. Some are very close-minded. Some are very impatient. You tell them to try something new, and they try it for two or three breaths and say, "This is not working," and they go back to their old ways. So you have to learn to be patient. And sometimes you have to get at these things indirectly. Like the way we breathe, the way we hold the body: There's a lot of clinging there, especially if we've had some traumatic event or difficult situation that we had to live in, and we found that if we held the body in a certain way, we were protected, even though it didn't provide that much protection. But there's something in the mind that says, "This is what protected you." So you hold on; you keep doing it again and again and again.

Meditation is the ability to see these things as actions and to see that there is the option not to do these things. It's actually a better option and it's something you can do: That's the dynamic. Because even though we cling, we don't cling 24/7 to the same things all the time. There will be moments when we let go. Then we pick it up again, and then we let go again, pick it up again.

This applies to all the different types of clinging: clinging to sensual thoughts; clinging to certain views about who you are, what the world is like; clinging to certain ways of thinking that things should be done this way and shouldn't be done that way, regardless of whether it's actually true or not; and then clinging to ideas about who you are. These are all activities. They're things we do. That's the first step: seeing them as actions.

The second step is seeing that there's a choice. You don't have to do it that way. This is what meditation instructions are all about. Your mind tends to run in certain ways, and then you say, "No, we're going to meditate. We're going to run

it in different ways.” This can be related to the breath, related to thoughts of goodwill, contemplation of the body, contemplation of death: thinking about things we ordinarily don’t think about and with a consistency we don’t usually apply to these topics. Ordinarily, we think about death sometimes. We think about the body sometimes. The breath sometimes. Goodwill sometimes. But here you decide to stick with one of these topics and see what happens. And you have to be patient, because suffering is an old habit. It’s an old bad habit, and meditating goes against the easy routes of the mind.

In the Buddha’s terms, he says that when you think in certain ways, you bend the mind in that direction. So now you’re trying to bend the mind in a different direction. If it’s a young sapling, it’s easy to bend, but if it’s an old tree, it takes an awful lot of repeated effort, but it can be done. Or as we say in English, the mind gets in certain ruts, and it takes a certain amount of willpower to get out of the rut and to repeat doing it again and again and again to create a new, more skillful rut in the mind.

But you keep subjecting the mind to new ways of thinking, new ways of paying attention, to drive home the point that you do have a choice. Then you have to argue with the voice that says, “Well, the choice isn’t better.” Or even more with the voice that says, “You can’t do it.” You know those voices, especially that last one, will pounce on the fact that these processes take time, and when the new way of acting doesn’t give immediate results, they say, “See? See? See? This is not working,” and you go back to your old ways.

You have to keep in mind the fact that this can take a long time, but not so long as the endless rounds of suffering that are going to come from just holding onto your old ways. What is easy is not necessarily what is good for you, and what is easy is not necessarily going to give you pleasure in the long run. This is something we have to learn as little children. It’s easy to like candy. It’s easy to like desserts. But in the long run, it’s not going to be good for you to keep eating candy and desserts. Because the word for “clinging” also means to feed, you can think of suffering as an eating addiction. You’ve got to give the mind new and better things to feed on. That’s what the path is for—the practice of mindfulness, concentration, the practice of virtue, learning to take some satisfaction in knowing that you’ve behaved in a skillful way.

In the Buddha’s instructions on how to help yourself through helping others—treating other people with goodwill and with sympathy, with patience and equanimity—the Buddha says it’s immediately good for them but it’s going to be good for you in the long run. It may go against your habits, but again, your habits are causing suffering. As for helping others through helping yourself, learn how to

be more mindful about what you're doing and saying and thinking. Try to notice when the mind is getting unskillful, and how you can bring it back in the right direction. You benefit directly and other people will benefit as well.

So it's good to remember that we're working on an addiction here, and as with all addictions, the person who's addicted is not the only person who's suffering. The suffering spills out on other people. When you take care of your addictions, you're also taking care of others.

So look at the ways you cling. Look at the activities you cling to, the ones that you do over and over again and either you turn a blind eye to their drawbacks or else you know the drawbacks, but you just keep going back anyhow, either out of an inability or an unwillingness to change. Learn how to look at them in a new way.

The Dhamma gives you all kinds of alternative ways of acting, alternative ways of thinking, and the Buddha's not talking in a sort of nice fairyland way about "Wouldn't it be nice if someday the human race could be like this or like that?" He's saying that these are things individual human beings can do, and when they do them, they stop suffering. And it's up to us to decide: Do we really want to stop suffering? After all, all things depend on desire, all things are rooted in desire, so learn how to nurture the desire to come to the point where you're not addicted to things that are causing you suffering. Get to the point where you no longer have to feed at all. That's when the mind is really free. But in the meantime, learn how to feed well. Develop new habits. And learn how to talk to yourself in a way that gives you the energy and the confidence that it can be done and you can do it. That's the only way out.