

## *The Door of the Cage*

*June 13, 2020*

As we go through life, we like to have a sense that we know what we're doing, that we're in control. We've figured out the world, how it works, what it has to offer, what we want out of the world. We're pretty clear about who we are, and what our abilities are to get what we want, and what we have to do.

When we're not clear about these things, we suffer. The world doesn't provide us with any sense of security, any sense of well-being. It doesn't provide food for the mind, because that confidence we have—that we do know how things work and what we want: That's how we feed off the world.

So when the Buddha comes and analyzes why we're suffering, saying that it's because we want the wrong things—we cling to wrong views about the world, to a wrong sense of what we should be doing in the world, and to a wrong sense about ourselves, and that we should let go of these things we cling to—we feel that he's leaving us defenseless. He's starving us. It's as if he's telling us it's not okay to feed on the world. In one way, that is what he's saying, because he says there's something better. But before we get to that something better, he doesn't want to have us starve.

He found in his own practice that by starving yourself on the path, you don't get anywhere. So he gives us alternative ways to cling. The big problem, he tells us, lies in these four different types of clinging that we engage in: clinging to sensuality, clinging to views, clinging to habits and practices, and clinging to doctrines of the self. Clinging to sensuality—that's the big problem. That's the first thing he's got to wean us off, and it's going to be hard. As for the other types of clinging—views about the world, in other words, your sense of how things work, the way things are; habit-and-practice clinging, your sense of what has to be done, what should be done in order to find happiness; and doctrine-of-the-self clinging, who you are in terms of your abilities to find happiness, and you the consumer of the happiness—with these, he provides provisional ways of clinging.

And of those three, habit-and-practice clinging is central. He's going to have us focus on what we do. In the beginning, he uses that to get us over some of our very unskillful ways of relating to sensuality. It's a gradual process, and he calls it a graduated discourse. He starts talking about giving, the good things that come from being generous; virtue, the joy that comes from being virtuous; and then the rewards of these things. The rewards are sensual pleasures—sensual pleasures in

the human realm, in the heavenly realms, where there are better pleasures than what we've got.

And then when he has us interested, he points out the drawbacks of even those better pleasures. You get up to any of the heavens, and you find that they don't last. You're just eating up your old merit, and someday you're going to fall. When you fall from heaven, it hurts. You've gotten used to things being just the way you want them. You think of something and it appears. But when you go back to the human realm or even worse, then when you think of things, they won't appear. You've been spoiled. You've developed some bad habits.

When you're willing to see that sensual pleasures have these drawbacks, that's when you're really ready to see that maybe renunciation might be a good thing—in other words, finding a pleasure that's not sensual. So he's not saying to starve yourself of pleasure, he's just telling you to find a better one.

This is where he brings in the practice of concentration, and has us form a right view around the concentration. This is a habit and practice you can cling to, and, as I said, the habit-and-practice clinging that he provides you with is going to be pivotal. This is going to be the central one that he focuses on. In terms of the provisional views that he has you hold on to, views about the world, they have nothing to do about who founded the world, who created the world, how eternal or infinite or non-eternal or non-infinite the world is, simply how the world works. How does causality work? In other words, he's giving you a view of the world that you're going to need in order to be confident that, yes, your actions do make a difference. And he gives you a sense of which actions are skillful within the context of that world. So it's a worldview designed to be focused on action.

The same with views of the self, who you are: His provisional view is simply that you are responsible and you're capable, that you're competent to follow the path and you will benefit from it. Even when he teaches not-self, he says, "Let go of what's not-self. It will be to your long-term welfare and happiness." There's still a "you" in there that you can hold onto provisionally as inspiration, as motivation to act. So you've got a worldview that's focused on action. You've got a self view that's focused on action.

And then the views about action: Those are the areas where he goes into a lot of detail about what kinds of actions are skillful in terms of your thoughts, your words, your deeds, how you engage with other people as you go through the day, how you engage with your mind as you sit down to meditate. There's a lot there.

His view of the world is a sketch. His view of the self that you use is a sketch. But the nuts and bolts of what practices to develop, that's where he goes into a lot of detail, very precise, very accurate, almost diagrams of how things work in the

mind. These instructions allow you to bring the mind to a state of concentration where it can see its actions more clearly: where it is that it's holding on, where it is that it's creating unnecessary stress and suffering for itself. This is the pivotal clinging. This is where you focus your attention: on what you're doing and trying to do it well.

You can think of yourself as being in a cage, like a bird in a cage. If you hold onto the walls of the cage, you're never going to get out. However, one of the walls has a door. You hold onto the door. Someday the door swings open, and you're out. If you hadn't held on to the door, you wouldn't be able to get out. But holding on to the door releases you. In the same way, you learn to let go of a lot of your old ways of doing things—thinking about yourself, thinking about the world, thinking about what you want out of the world—and you hold on to the teachings on karma. You hold onto the teachings on what's skillful.

The four noble truths are a variation, or a development, of the teaching on karma—what you do that leads to suffering, what you do that leads to the end of suffering. It's all about action.

So the Buddha's not leaving you totally adrift. He's not depriving you of your food. You feed off of right view, feed off of the confidence that you're doing things that are important, that will have an impact. If you look after your intentions, that will carry you through a lot. If you look at your actions, that will teach you where even your intentions may still need some more work. But it's all right here. It's all within your power to do this.

This is where you really are in control because you do have the power to choose your actions. As Ajaan Suwat used to like to say, "We all have one person: ourselves." So we should be responsible for that one person. We spend too much of our time trying to control things outside, and not enough trying to control our minds, because that's where the real control comes from—and is effective.

So be confident that, yes, your actions will make a difference. And as for your old ways of thinking about yourself, your old ways of thinking about the world, what you want out of the world: Learn to get some distance from them. Realize that the Buddha's giving you something much better to hold onto. Otherwise, you just hold on to the bars of the cage and you wonder why you're not satisfied. Instead, you should hold onto the bars that are part of that door. That way, when the door opens, you're out. You're free. And as the Buddha says, once you're totally free, then there's really nothing you have to hold onto. Like birds flying through space, you don't have to hold onto anything, and you don't leave any tracks.