

Serial Clinging Is Still Clinging

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There was a book several years back on the topic of the Buddhist attitude toward desire. The author was making the point that the problem is that we cling to the objects of our desires, but that if we could have a desire without clinging to the object, we'd be fine. Of course, that's a recipe for a serial sex offender: You keep on desiring, and first you have one object; then you don't care about it anymore. You find another object, and then don't care about that anymore.

The author had everything backwards. The desire itself is the problem. The fascination with thinking about sensual objects: That's what we cling to. The particular object may change: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile sensations. And look at the mind. It runs all over the place. It's not so much attached to the objects as it is to the planning, the fantasizing. And even there, the plans and the fantasies may change.

Clinging to sensuality doesn't mean that you hold to one fantasy or one plan. It means you hold on to this or that activity long enough to feed on it. Then you go looking for something else to feed on. The same holds for the other types of clinging: clinging to views, clinging to habits and practices, clinging to doctrines of the self.

Clinging to views doesn't mean you have a fixed view that you hold on to all the time. You hold on to one view, and then you can change it. You hold on to the next one, you change that, hold on to another one. You can't avoid view-clinging by just wandering around with different views or saying that you don't have any particular view you hold on to all the time. The fact that you hold on to one long enough to base an action on it—that's clinging enough.

The same with habits and practices. You can change your habits and practices, your ideas of what you should and shouldn't do, believing one thing today, another thing tomorrow. It's still clinging. The same with doctrines of the self: You can have different ideas of who you are. You already go through the day with different ideas of who you are. Sometimes you identify with your body, sometimes with your feelings, sometimes with your perceptions, your thoughts, your consciousness, or any combination of these. If you were to draw a picture of your sense of self, it would be like an amoeba, changing shape all the time. It all still counts as clinging, because the Buddha's not telling you, "Wander around with your ideas. Wander around with your ideas, what should and shouldn't be done,

what the world is like, who you are.” It’d be hard to follow a path of practice that would amount to anything if everything were so shifty.

So you can’t avoid clinging by changing your mind all the time. You’re just turning into a serial clinger. Because what do you do? You need to have some views about the world, some views about what is appropriate and what’s not, who you are in terms of whether you’re capable of making a change in the world, making a change in your experience. You have to have certain views about these things, and you have to hold to them if you want to behave in a consistent manner. That way, you can focus on a goal and work all the way to that goal.

So the solution is not to keep changing your views. The solution is finding views that get you to act in the right way consistently until you reach the threshold. This is what the Buddha calls the karma that leads to the end of karma, and it’s going to require firmly held right views, and devotion to skillful precepts and skillful practices, and a consistent view of yourself as being responsible, of wanting to put an end to suffering, and believing in yourself that you can do this —at the same time, realizing that you’re the one who *has* to be responsible.

So the way out of clinging actually is holding on to certain views, certain habits, certain ways of defining yourself that are skillful. This kind of holding on is part of the Buddha’s strategy. You have to remember that discernment is always strategic. The Buddha’s not just describing things for the sake of the description. He’s telling you, “Think in these ways, up to this point, and then you’re going to have to abandon those ways.” But in the meantime, hold on and be consistent.

Now, the only clinging that the Buddha doesn’t leave room for in the path is clinging to sensuality. This doesn’t mean that you have to reject all sensual pleasures. Remember, sensuality is your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, planning for them, fantasizing about them. But as for the pleasures themselves, there will be those in accordance with the path and those not in accordance with the path.

There are some cases where the Buddha says, across the board, that certain pleasures are to be avoided. Any sensual pleasure that involves breaking the precepts, for instance, is out of bounds.

There are other pleasures that some people find can indulge in with no problem. Other people have a problem. This is going to be an individual matter. You notice this in Thailand. There are some monks who live in a monastery, in the relative comfort of the monastery, and they’re able to practice perfectly fine. Other monks need the hardships of the forest in order to become heedful. So this will be an individual matter. As the Buddha said, any pleasure that accords with the Dhamma, any pleasure that you notice that as you follow that pleasure. skillful

states develop in the mind, unskillful states fall away—that pleasure is perfectly fine. The pleasures to watch out for are those where, if you indulge in them, skillful states deteriorate and unskillful states grow: Those pleasures you’ve got to do away with. So you’ve got to look into your own mind and be honest about what sensual pleasures are doing to it.

But with the other forms of clinging, the Buddha gives you skillful ways of clinging for the purpose of the path, realizing that you’ll have to let go at some point. Ajaan Maha Boowa gives a nice analogy. He says it’s like climbing a ladder to the roof of a house. You hold on to one rung with one hand, and then you hold on to the next rung with the other hand. You don’t let go of the first rung until your second hand is on the higher rung. Then you let go, and you stretch your first hand up even higher. Once you firmly grasp the next higher rung, you let go of the second one, and so on up. When you get off the ladder and you’re on the roof, that’s when you let go of the ladder entirely. But until that point, you’ve got to hold on.

The Buddha once was teaching Ven. Ananda, going through a list of the different stages of concentration, starting with the fourth jhana and going higher, talking about how when you get to the highest level of concentration, you realize there’s a pure state of equanimity. As long as you’re attached to that equanimity, you’re going to not be able to gain awakening. But if you learn to see that it, too, is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, you learn to let go. Then you can be free. And Ananda’s comment was the Buddha was teaching how to get across the river going from one clinging to the next.

So you will be clinging as you follow the path. The more consistent you are in clinging to right view, the better. Our problem is we hold on to it sometimes, and then change our minds other times. So watch out for the justifying voice that says, “See? I’m letting go. I’m showing that I’m not clinging.” That’s not the case. You’ve just gone back to cling to something that’s not as skillful. Then you get stuck in what Ajaan Lee talks about when he describes the two paths we usually follow, saying that our problem is that we follow the right path sometimes, and then the not-right path other times. As a result, we don’t really get anywhere. If you want to get someplace, you hold on to the right path all the way.

So watch out for this tendency of the mind to want to switch around. Remember, there’s no justification in the Dhamma for it. And especially watch out for that voice that says, “I’m learning how to be unattached.” That’s very seductive, and it sounds like it’s got the Dhamma on its side. This is one of the things you have to watch out for all along, because the defilements can begin to sound like Dhamma sometimes. They can take a Dhamma teaching that’s true

and beneficial, but that's not the right time, or it may not even be true. It sounds right. But if you look at it carefully, you begin to realize that something's off. All this comes down to that tendency that Ajaan Chah noted. He said that when you really look at your mind, one of the first things you realize is how much it lies to itself. You can take the Dhamma and turn it into not-Dhamma and yet still think it's Dhamma. So remember this.

Clinging doesn't mean you just hold on to something fixedly. It means you hold on to something long enough to make a decision about what to do based on your idea of what the world is, what should and shouldn't be done, who you are, and the extent to which you'll benefit from that action. If you keep changing your views about this, Ajaan Lee's image is of paddling around in a little lake. You paddle, and you paddle, and you paddle, and you think you're going to get someplace, but you've just been paddling in circles. You want to get clear about right view, clear about what the precepts and practice of concentration are all about, clear about your abilities to follow the path, and clear about your desire to really want to make it all the way. When you're clear about these things, you hold on to them, and follow them to the end. That way, your actions will be consistent and headed in one direction: the direct path. And it's the direct path that takes you where you want to go.