

Clinging, Addictions, Obsessions

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As the Buddha said, suffering is the clinging-aggregates. The aggregates themselves are related to the way we feed, and clinging is related to the way we feed as well. The word for clinging—*upādāna*—can also mean sustenance and the act of taking sustenance off of things. Of course, we don't think of feeding as suffering. For most of us, that's how we get our pleasure in life, that's how we keep going as beings. We take lots of pleasure in thinking about feeding, planning for feeding, and then in the actual feeding itself.

This is where the Buddha's teachings go against the grain. But our suffering is strong, so it needs something that goes very strongly against the grain, our attachment to our suffering, if we're going to end it. As Ajaan Suwat used to like to say, our likes are what makes us suffer. Food is one of the big likes in life. And the act of feeding is one of the big likes in life, too. So we need pretty strong medicine to counteract that.

When you look at the types of clinging, you'll see that they're very closely related to the way we feed. Sensuality clinging has to do with our fascination with thinking about the food we're going to take—what we're going to have tomorrow; how we're going to fix it; how good it's going to taste. We can think about that for *long* periods of time, much longer than the actual amount of time we spend eating the food.

Then there's clinging to habits and practices: the way we feed; the kinds of things we will do in order to get food; our ideas of what's a legitimate way of looking for food and which ones are not; and, once you've got the food, how you fix it. We tend to identify ourselves very strongly with this: people who are vegan; people who are gluten-free; people who won't take soy; people who eat nothing but soy. The list is very long. It just keeps getting longer and longer, it seems.

As for how the food has to be fixed, there are lots of views in the world out there: what counts as food; what doesn't count as food; what foods are worthwhile, which ones are not. This morning I was mentioning to a group of visitors the fact that I'm on statins right now, and I received a long, long series of lectures about whether they were good or bad. The same goes for lots of different kinds of foods.

Finally there's your sense of yourself as the person who's being fed by all this: who you are; what kind of person looks for food in a certain way; what kind of person eats certain kinds of food; what kind of person is going to be benefiting from the food; what kind of person you're going to become as a result of eating in a certain way. We're all very much attached to these things.

You see this particularly in our obsessions, our addictive behavior—because we feed not only on food but also on types of behavior and ideas and our relationships with other people. Some of these things can get pretty addictive and obsessive, and we know they're unhealthy, but we keep going back for them.

So you have to analyze them in the Buddha's terms. See that the strength of the addiction lies in the different kinds of clinging: your fascination with thinking about how good it's going to be; the pleasure you're going to get out of that particular kind of thinking or addiction. And even when a large part of the mind realizes it's bad for you, there's another part that really goes for it and is thoroughly convinced it's a good thing. You have to ferret that out, and you have to argue with it.

Then there are habit and practices. We tend to be very quick to fall into old habitual ways of behaving. And because we've practiced them so often and follow through with them so often, they seem almost effortless. Any other way of looking for pleasure goes very strongly against the grain.

Our views about what types of pleasure there are out there, our views about how responsible we are for what's going to happen down the line: This is a big addiction, because

the addictive mind set, the obsessive mind set, just says, “Well, I’m going to go for my pleasure right now, and who cares about the future because the future is uncertain, but this hit or this type of behavior: That seems to be pretty certain.” That, too, is a kind of view.

And your sense of who you are: When you start identifying with that addictive part of your personality, that becomes your identity, and you find it harder and harder to think about other ways of doing things, of being a person who does things in other ways. You tend to think that you’re incapable of doing them. Or that you try for a while and then you give up and say that that’s proof you can’t do it, that you can’t get away from your old behavior.

So we need strong medicine to counteract this. And this is what the noble eightfold path is for. It’s meant to attack these different kinds of clinging.

Thinking of sensuality, you have to replace with right resolve and with the desire in right effort. You have to learn how to motivate yourself to say, “There must be something better in life.” You think about how much better it would be if you didn’t give in to that particular kind of behavior. Resolve for renunciation, for harmlessness: You don’t want to harm yourself. You don’t want to have ill will for yourself, because often there’s that aspect to an addiction. Instead, think about how good it would be to be free. Those two factors—right resolve and right effort—help to replace the clinging to sensuality.

As for habits and practices, the path recommends that we take on new habits: the habits of right action, right speech, right livelihood. Take the precepts and you’ll find that you can actually follow through with them, and that life really does get better this way. You’re creating fewer and fewer problems for yourself. Then there’s the practice of concentration: This is right mindfulness and right concentration. You find that these alternative forms of pleasure are better to pursue—and that you can tap in to them.

With views, of course, we replace them with right views. One of the lessons of right view is that the important issue in life is not the pleasure that you’re sucking out of life, but the things you’re doing and the consequences you’re going to have down the line. You have to take those

things very seriously. Because, as Ajaan Suwat liked to say, “Those sensual pleasures you had last week: Where are they now?” They’re totally gone; but you *are* left with the karma. If you don’t believe in karma, just look at the habits you’ve developed. You get into these old ruts: these old ways of thinking, these old ways of behaving. The more you indulge them, the harder they are to get out of. That’s what you’re left with: the habit. You’re left with the action. So you have to see this very clearly, and realize that it’s causing a lot of suffering.

This is something that we tend to turn a blind eye to—both the suffering we cause ourselves and the suffering we cause to others. It’s very easy to say, “Well, it doesn’t matter” or “It’s unavoidable” or “It’s a part of embracing all of life”—that’s a big one. Recently I was reading somebody saying how life is wonderful, and therefore we have to see everything in life as wonderful, including aging, illness, and death, and all the horrible things that people do to one another. But the Buddha never said that. You have to take seriously the fact that our actions are leading to suffering, and a lot of the suffering is pointless. It accomplishes nothing.

So we have to replace the views of our addictive thinking with right views, starting with mundane right view about karma, and then right view about suffering and its causes. We have to see the suffering in feeding on our old behavior. That’s suffering right there, and you’ve got to see it.

So there we have all the factors of the path.

As for the doctrines of the self, that’s also related to right view, and in particular to your sense of who you are in relationship to the kinds of pleasure you like to think about, the skills you have. For most of us, addictive behavior comes from just a lack of alternative skills. But if you practice the alternative skills, you become the kind of person who has those skills. As Ajaan Lee would often say, “Don’t be too quick to go for inconstancy, stress, and not self, especially the not-self part.” He says, “You want to develop concentration so that you can have a sense of constancy in your mind, something that you can hold on to. Something that’s pleasant; something that’s under your control.”

There's going to be a sense of self you build around that. That then becomes your new sense of self who finds it easier and easier to resist your old addictive ways of thinking, your addictive behavior.

So you take the path and you use it to counteract all your forms of clinging. And it's important to see that these teachings on clinging are not very abstract; they're very closely related to the way we feed off of things. The path is there to give us an alternative way of feeding, a way that—instead of sapping our strength—actually builds our strength. It gets the mind more and more sensitive to what real happiness is.

Because everything all comes down to this desire for happiness. Someone was saying today that they had trouble seeing that they deserved happiness. But the Buddha never talks about deserving happiness or not deserving happiness. He was here to put an end to suffering, whether deserved or not. We can think about lots of different ways we might deserve to suffer or other people might deserve to suffer, but that's part of our views that are making us continue to suffer, *unnecessarily*. The opportunity to stop making yourself suffer is here. And in not placing the burden of suffering on yourself, you putting less of a burden on other people; you're actually more able to help them.

So learn to straighten out your views around this whole issue of feeding. Straighten out your fascination with thinking about sensuality; start thinking about the topics of right resolve and right effort. There is desire there in right effort. In fact it's an important part. You have to learn to *want* to do it.

So learn how to talk yourself into wanting to follow the path. The part of the mind that doesn't like to meditate will put up arguments, but you've got to have your arguments ready to go against them, so that you're not just going through the motions. You're actually looking directly into your breath right now; looking into your mind as it relates to the breath so that you can understand it.

Figure out this mind that's so obstreperous. You think it's you, you think it's yours, but there's so much in it that's going against your best interests. Learn how to be fascinated with trying to figure that out. Pick up the habits of the precepts, the practice of mindfulness and concentration, straighten out your views about what's important in life, what's possible in life, and you'll become a different person. And that different person will help carry you through—not only getting over the addictive behavior, but also learning how to master the skills, so that they go higher and higher.

There really is this potential within us for something deathless, so why are we dithering around with things that we know are harmful for ourselves? The deathless is there; it's attainable. When you develop the sense of self that says, "Okay, I can do this. I want to do this," you learn the skills, and it's possible.

Eventually, that sense of self will actually take you to the point where you don't need it anymore. And when you let go of it, you're letting go not because you're disgusted with it or angry at it, which is how we tend to let go of certain members of our self committee. It's a raft. When it's taken you to the further shore, you leave it on the shore, but you leave it with a sense of appreciation. It's something that you cling to as you get across the river, and then you can let it go; you're standing on firm ground, as the Buddha said.

So use the path to get over all these forms of clinging. And even though you may not be on the firm ground of total awakening, you find that things are a lot more solid, lot more reliable as you've got the path to hold on to. And you become more solid and more reliable, too: a better person to live with, both for yourself and for the people around you.