

Parsing Out Suffering

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The Buddha says that to get beyond suffering, we have to comprehend it. That's the duty with regard to the first noble truth. And comprehending it basically comes down to understanding why we look for happiness in all the wrong places, in all the wrong ways. The Buddha could have simply said that—we want pleasure, but we're not finding it the right way—but that wouldn't be all that helpful. He parses it out for us—in two ways. First he talks about the five aggregates, how we cling to them. Then he talks about the four kinds of clinging. You look at the various ways people look for happiness in the world, and you can see that they can be analyzed in those terms if you really want to understand them, and especially if you want to understand how you're looking for happiness in the wrong ways.

Both the aggregates and the forms of clinging relate to feeding, because that's what basically defines us. As the Buddha said, once you become a being, you have to feed. That's something we all have in common. We're all looking for pleasure, a pleasure that comes from feeding, but we tend to focus on different aspects of it. We're not focused only on the pleasant feeling of fullness that comes when the food is down in the stomach. There are other aspects of what we find enjoyable about feeding as well.

One is that we get to use our body. If we didn't have food, the body wouldn't work.

Then we like to get good at understanding, perceiving what kinds of hungers we have. That's what perception is all about—understanding: Are you hungry for something salty or something sweet? Are you hungry for a relationship, hungry for power?

Then there are the various ways we go about satisfying that hunger. How do we look for the food we want, and once we get it, how do we prepare it? That's what a lot of the different forms of clinging come under, the fourth aggregate: fabrication.

Then there's consciousness, awareness of all these things. We enjoy knowing these processes, we can't conceive of not being aware of them. If you weren't aware, then you wouldn't be able to follow any of these other activities.

Those are the aggregate as they relate to feeding. Then the different forms of clinging also relate to feeding. There's sensual clinging, clinging to habits and

practices, clinging to views, and clinging to doctrines of the self. In an embryo form, we find all these things in the way we like to feed.

Sensual clinging is basically liking to fantasize about food. They say that when people first arrived in concentration camps, the men were separated from the women, and they talked about sex for a couple of days. Then they stopped. Everybody was too hungry. Then from that point on all they could talk about was food: the different recipes their mothers used to make, their wives used to make.

We get a real charge out of fantasizing about the different things we can eat, even though a lot of energy goes into that, and often a lot of disappointed hopes, but still we keep at that process of fantasizing about how this would be good and that would be good. That's clinging to sensuality.

Clinging to habits and practices is clinging to particular ideas about how food should be fixed, how you should go about getting it. When I was in France, one of the people there fixed a ratatouille into which she put olives. A while later, I mentioned that to another group of people in France, and you could see the shudder go through the room: Nobody puts olives in ratatouille. I found out later that there were some people who said you couldn't even put tomatoes in ratatouille if you wanted to do a real one. Tomatoes were a later introduction to France. And it's not just the French: Everybody has their attachment to particular ways of fixing food.

There's a great panel in *Asterix*, where women who Asterix has been meeting in his various adventures all come together for a big party, and they sit around talking about food. One from Spain talks about how she likes to cook things in olive oil, and a woman from England says, "You don't say. I found that if you boil things in water it gives them a really good taste." So we all have our ways of saying how food should be fixed. That's clinging to habits and practices.

Then there are views about how much we have to stock food up. What are the dangers out there in the world that are going to keep us from eating? What do we have to lay claim to in order to feel really secure in our source of food? And this business of feeding, how long do we have to feed? Is it simply a matter of feeding until we die? Or is there going to be feeding after we die? This is what a lot of the Vedic religions are about: the idea being that if you're going to go up to heaven, you have to have food to go there and stay there. That's why they had all their sacrifices, thinking that the things you burned in the sacrificial fire would get carried up by the smoke and be waiting for you in heaven.

That's clinging to both a view about the world, and to a particular habit and practice.

Then, of course, there's clinging to your idea of who you are. How long do you have to worry about your survival? And what kind of survival do you really want? The way you look for food is directly related to those questions. Some people are pretty callous about how they look for food. In other words, they're willing to kill, steal, cheat, and do all kinds of other things. Other people say, "No, I couldn't live with myself if I did that." Your idea who you are is going to determine how you think about food. And then again the question is, "If I have to survive beyond this lifetime, I've got to worry about not only feeding myself now, but also feeding myself after that."

These are the ways we cling to the activities around feeding. These types of clinging then get transferred into other areas as well.

The Buddha parses this all out because he wants to show that it's not simply that our desire for pleasure would explain everything. He does say that we are attached to the different aggregates because each of them does offer pleasure. There's another place where he says that everything converges in feeling, particularly our desire for feelings for pleasure. But then you look at people in the world and you look at yourself: There are a lot of things you do that cause suffering and yet you find pleasure in them. That's what you've got to understand. That's why the Buddha parses things out in terms of the five aggregates: Which kinds of activity are you attached to? Is there a particular perception you like? A particular feeling or thought fabrication?

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about his contemplation of the body. The practice got so that he was really good at looking at every person and seeing them reduced to what was inside. But it didn't really put in an end to the possibility of lust in his mind. He tested it for a while, and finally realized it had to do with the perception, that something in the mind likes the perception of beauty, and then likes to take that perception and apply it to things around you. That was what he was attached to, not so much the bodies out there, but his perceptions about them.

You could say the same thing about your thought fabrications around fantasizing about your pleasures. Sometimes—often—the pleasures are not nearly as nice as your fantasies. You're actually attached to the fantasies more than you are to the pleasures. There are people attached to particular views that demand a lot of them. But they feel secure in the fact that they've got the inside dope on how the world works. They're willing to put up with a lot of suffering in order to get a reward at the end.

The Buddha himself saw this in the austerities he followed for those six years. He denied himself all kinds of pleasures. But then he realized he was still attached.

Even though he wouldn't even let himself think about sensuality, still there was something inside that was attached. He was attached to that idea that if you do things this way, there will be a reward.

You look around, and you see how people hold on to political views and religious views that have a lot of bad consequences for them. Yet they turn a blind eye to them, because they're looking for something else, or they see something else in what they're holding onto.

I had a teacher in school. She was born in Brooklyn from a Jewish family and converted to Catholicism. She was a real admirer of Augustine. And Augustine teaches predestination, the idea that God creates some people for the purpose of sending them to hell. She was willing to put up with that because she felt secure in the idea that she'd had an experience of God, which she took as a sign that she wasn't going to be one of those people destined to hell. Imagine holding a view like that. In order to find comfort in your religious experience, you have to hold to a view that consigns a large part of humanity to hell. Yet there're people who hold to this.

You look at people outside, and then, of course you then have to turn around and look at yourself: In what ways are you holding on to things that are really detrimental? You can parse things out in terms of the five aggregates: Is it a perception that you like? Or a way of thinking that you like, that you find pleasant? How do you engage in that particular kind of perception or thinking? In your fantasies, in your beliefs? In your idea that things have to be done a certain way? In your views about the world at large, or in your ideas of who you are?

Now, you notice, of course, that as we practice, we have to make use at least three of those kinds of clinging. Sensuality, the fascination with fantasizing about sensual pleasures, the Buddha puts aside. That doesn't have a role in the path. But we do have to hold on to certain ideas of how things are done: in terms of the precepts, in terms of meditation, and the practice of generosity. We hold on to certain views about how the world works. And we hold onto ideas about who we are, at least to the extent that we're the people who are responsible for our happiness—and we're capable of finding it.

But these particular views, these particular practices we have, we hold on to because they actually do give results, and they take us to a place where we don't have to hold on to them anymore.

This is why the Buddha gave the image of the raft or the image of the relay chariots. There's one relay chariot. You hop into that, you go for a distance, and then there's another relay chariot waiting for you. You hop into that and keep going. The first chariot never makes it to the end. And you're not there to stay in

the chariots, you're there in the chariots to get someplace else. As the Buddha pointed out, right view, right practice: These are things that you can hold on to that will take you across.

So there's going to be a certain amount of pain and stress involved in the practice. But unlike other forms of clinging, these forms of clinging actually deliver you to a place where you don't have to cling anymore. Otherwise, you just keep coming back, and back, and back, changing your habits a bit, changing your views a bit, and trying and trying and trying to find something that works—creating a lot of suffering for yourself, and often suffering for other people in the process.

So that's the choice. The path may be difficult, it may require a lot of effort on our part, but it does take us to a place where the effort can be put aside. And we're not creating suffering for anybody. The happiness that comes more than compensates. Remember that image that the Buddha gave when he said that if you could make a deal that someone spears you with 300 spears a day—100 in the morning, 100 at noon, 100 in the evening—for a hundred years, but then you'd be guaranteed awakening at the end, it would be a good deal. When the awakening came, you wouldn't even think that you'd gained it with pain. The goal is that good.

We get there by comprehending why it is that we look for happiness in the wrong ways, why that's causing us suffering. The Buddha's analysis is there to help us parse things out so that we can locate exactly where we're going wrong—where we're clinging, what we're clinging to, and why—and how we can let go.