

Clinging & the End of Clinging

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When the Buddha formulated his first noble truth—the truth of suffering and stress—he didn't say something useless like, "Life is suffering." He didn't say something vague and obvious like, "There is suffering." He said something more specific, useful, and insightful: "Suffering is the five clinging-aggregates." As he pointed out elsewhere, the problem isn't with the aggregates of form, feeling, perceptions, fabrication, or consciousness. The problem is with the clinging. So, suffering is clinging. When he said that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering, he was basically saying all he taught was clinging and the end of clinging.

When we practice, this presents a challenge, because he's telling us that we're suffering because of our attachments. The firmer our attachments, the more strongly we hold to them, then the more we have to let go of them because they're causing us the most suffering. This is why that first noble truth is a noble truth.

The simple act of suffering is not noble, and if we were to blame our suffering on other people or things outside that wouldn't be noble. What's noble is realizing that we have to sacrifice things that we hold to dearly, and we're willing to make the sacrifice. But, as the Buddha said, it's not total sacrifice. Every time he recommends a sacrifice, it's a trade up. As he said, when you let go of things that are not really your self, it's going to be for your long-term welfare and happiness.

He was talking to a group of monks one time and he said, "You see these leaves and twigs and branches. If someone started burning them, would you say that that person is burning you?" The monks said, "No, because those twigs and leaves and branches are not us or ours." "In the same way," the Buddha said, "what's not really yours: let go of it. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness." So he's not totally negating you. He's just pointing out that you're suffering because you're holding on to things that are not really yours.

There are a lot of things we hold on to that aren't material things. We hold on to our skills. We hold on to our way of acting in the world. This is related to our sense of what the world is, and what should be done, and what things are worth wanting. This is why the Buddha said there are four types of clinging, not just one. We don't just cling to our selves. We also cling to our views about how the world works, how it's structured, and to our ideas of what should be

done within that world to find the pleasures we want—most usually, sensual pleasures.

But the Buddha's asking you to aim at something higher, and here again this is why these truths are noble. You aim at something higher than sensuality because sensual pleasures come and go. Often, when they go, we're left with the karma that we did to gain them, along with the disappointment that they're now gone. The same with status, praise of other people. He tells you to ask yourself: Are these things really worthwhile? So much of what we do is for sensual pleasures, status, praise, wealth, the things of the world, but they all disappoint.

So you have to look at the aspects of yourself that you've developed in order to develop these things. Are they going to be useful on the path?

The Buddha wants you to aim for something higher that's going to require a different set of skills. Some of your old skills may have to die because they're actually getting in the way of the practice. The things that we do to get ahead in the world will not necessarily help us get ahead in the Dhamma. Sometimes they're at direct cross-purposes because as we call into question where we're aiming in life, it begins to call into question a lot of the things we've been doing; a lot of the things we identify with as our self. Our old strategies for finding happiness, we suddenly find, are leading more to pain.

There are some people who resist. They say "Well, this is just who I am." But they're like the people who can't adjust when they go to a new culture or when their own society undergoes radical change. We're beginning to see this all around us. Life is different now, and when people keep talking about returning to normal, you wonder what that new "normal" will be—and what new people they'll have to become in order to negotiate that new normal skillfully.

The change is even more drastic as you come into the culture of the noble ones, where things that are valued in the world are not valued. Some of them are. It's not like you're totally having to abandon your old skills. In some cases, it's just a matter of learning how to convert your old skills to a new purpose. But there are some old skills and some ways of acting that are simply no longer appropriate, because the way we act creates our sense of what we are. That means that a lot of the things that we think are actually part of us, of our very being, are going to have to be left behind.

Again, some people resist—like the people who say, "Now that Buddhism has come to the West, it has to adopt a Western world view, Western values." That's missing the whole point.

The Buddha formulated a set of values and a world view that were specifically designed for putting an end to suffering, regardless of your cultural background. Even for people in ancient

India, it was quite a shift.

So there's a lot we have to let go. After all, we're here for the end of clinging, not just because we think clinging is a bad idea but because we realize, as the Buddha said, that suffering lies in the clinging. If you don't want to suffer, you have to learn how to let go. Let go skillfully. You hold on to the path while you're doing it, but there are many things with which you identify that you'll have to let go.

But there is compensation. A different *you* develops around your ability to meditate, around your ability to observe the precepts, around your ability to take joy in generosity. It's one of the reasons why these meritorious activities are an important part of the path. They create a healthy you. They help you realize how much your self-esteem, your self-worth should depend on doing things that really are beneficial for yourself and for others. Things that are harmless. Ways of finding happiness that are harmless. Because that you is much more secure than the old you that had to claw its way through the world.

So remember, we're on a noble path. Suffering and the cause of suffering as truths are not noble in themselves, but when you view them from the right perspective and you follow the duties that are appropriate for those truths—in other words, comprehending the suffering and abandoning the craving—then those truths become noble. You become noble. And you progress on the noble path.