

## *Clinging*

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The Buddha identified suffering as the five clinging-aggregates. And the problem is not the aggregates. It's the clinging. It comes in four forms: clinging to sensuality, to views, to habits and practices, and to doctrines of the self. But regardless of the form, you can feel it physically, as a tightening in the breath energy in the body. Now, the physical feeling is not the clinging itself. It's a byproduct, but it aggravates it. You could also take it as a sign: When something moves in the mind and there's a tightening up in the body, the mind is holding on to something.

When we meditate and breathe through patterns of tension in the body, we're doing symptom management, because what often makes it seem so oppressive is the fact that it tightens up the body, and we're carrying it around. So it helps to let go physically a little bit. Of course, that doesn't let it go in the mind, which is where the real clinging is and the real problem is. But breathing through the physical side effects makes the problem in the mind more manageable.

Remember that you're learning a skill here as you meditate that you don't use just while you're meditating. It's useful in all circumstances: You can focus on something and disperse the tension wherever you're focused. It may be because of this reason that some people object to the idea of calling *samadhi* "concentration," because they think concentration has to be tense. It doesn't. It's centered. The trick is to focus on something and disperse the energy there at the same time. Wherever you notice there's tension in the body as you make your survey as you're settling down, get used to dispersing tension wherever you focus. Then you can use that skill any time of the day. But, as I said, it's symptom management.

The real therapy is when you come to comprehend the clinging inside the mind. And you come to comprehend it not only in treating it as a problem you're suffering from, but also in using clinging on the path. You don't let go of everything all at once. Of the four kinds of clinging, three of them are actually useful on the path. Clinging for sensuality, which is basically sitting around and fantasizing about beautiful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations: That doesn't have any role in the path. But the other three kinds of clinging do. And you'll notice that they're useful because they all fall under your basic mental functions.

Freud had different names for these types of clinging. Doctrine of the self, that's your ego. Habits and practices, the idea of what you should do, that's your

superego. Clinging to views, that's the reality principle. And for most of us, clinging to sensuality is where the id goes. We're looking for pleasure.

As we're practicing concentration, though, we're trying to redirect our desire for pleasure to something more noble, more harmless. But the real work is focusing on those other three. You can't really get rid of clinging to sensuality unless you've done some work on the other three. The concentration is just pacification. Of the other three, the most important one is habits and practices. You have a clear idea of what should and shouldn't be done. The Buddha said that that was his main gift to his students. Any teacher, he said, who could not give the basis for deciding what should and shouldn't be done was leaving students unprotected, bewildered.

So the Buddha's laying out a path of action: This is what you should do. Virtue, concentration, discernment: You hold on to these activities. As for views, you want a view that tells you the importance of action. That's what mundane right view is all about: that your actions really are real, they have effects, and the effect has to do with the intention behind them. That's a view of the world that's really helpful on the path because it keeps focusing you back on: What are you doing, what are you doing, why are you doing it?

As for doctrines of the self, you want to learn how to see your sense of the self as a kind of action. You create a sense of self around your desires: "you" as the producer who can create conditions that will help you get those desires, and then "you" as the consumer who will to enjoy the desired objects once they're obtained. You want to learn how to see both of those "you's" as actions. That's why the Buddha has you analyze your sense of self into those different aggregates—form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness—because the aggregates, too, are primarily actions.

Even form, the form of your body, is something you're doing. You're constantly telling yourself, "Where is the body right now?" Just sitting here still, there's an activity that goes around maintaining that sense of form, one that's primarily an activity of perception. As for feelings, they feel; perceptions perceive, fabrications fabricate things, consciousness cognizes. These aggregates are defined by verbs. So you're putting yourself together out of verbs, and you want to see that, because that gives you a way of loosening up your attachments to unskillful parts of yourself, the ones that say, "Well, I've been this way since who knows when. You're not going to teach old dogs new tricks." But you look at your aggregates. They're not old dogs. They're activities you're doing again and again, but you can do them in a new way.

So your views and your sense of self are there to focus more and more attention on what should and shouldn't be done. Now, in Freud's analysis, the shoulds, or the superego, are pretty oppressive, because he lived in a culture where the ultimate superego, God, was not really all that concerned with your happiness. But the superego in the Buddha's teachings, the duties of the four noble truths, are there specifically for the sake of true happiness, or long-term happiness. They're on your side. So there doesn't have to be a constant conflict between your desires and your sense of what should be done. It's more a conflict among desires, a conflict among shoulds. The Buddha wants you to look to see: What are the shoulds you're carrying around, the ones you're clinging to, the ones that get you upset when things are not going as you think they should be going? That's where you want to look, and that's where the therapy is done. You ask yourself when you're upset: *Why* should you be upset? The defilements have their shoulds, too, you know.

So these shoulds that you're carrying around: Are they the shoulds of the Dhamma or the shoulds of the defilements? You want to look into that. Place some question marks next to them, especially if they're causing you to suffer.

Now, there is some stress of being on the path. You've got to learn how to distinguish the necessary stress of the path from all the unnecessary stress that you're adding to yourself that's just piling on the suffering.

As long as you realize that those are where the questions are, it helps to focus your attention, and you can come to useful answers. Here again, the concentration helps you to step back and do some symptom management so that the body can be relaxed as you're looking at the different arguments going on in the mind. You can look at them with a measure of—detachment's not the right word—it's more objectivity, at the very least: the ability to step back.

So as you catch yourself clinging to things that make you suffer, remember the first response is to release the physical side of the tension: the holding on. Then look at the mind's activities. What are you doing? What are the other people doing? These shoulds that you carry around: Do they really apply? Are they really appropriate? They, of course, will say, "Yes, yes, yes." But when you learn how to have a measure of skepticism toward them, you can begin to sort them out. You find that you have a lot of excess baggage you can throw away and you can do perfectly fine.

A lot of us think that if we don't hold on to certain ideas or certain standards for what should and shouldn't be done, we won't be able to survive in this world. But the Buddha's showing that a lot of our shoulds are really unnecessary: excess baggage. He's giving us standards for figuring out what's excess and what's

necessary. The path is necessary. There will come a day when you can let that go, too, but in the meantime, hold on because it's going to take you to a good place, a place where you won't need any clinging.

Again, think of the image of the raft. When you get to the other side, you let go. In the meantime, hold on. Otherwise, you're going to get swept down the river. Just be careful that when you're on the raft and you see some things floating by, you don't grab on to them, too, because they can very easily pull you down.