Clinging to What Pains You

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One of the main ironies of life is that every time we act, it’s for the sake of happiness and pleasure, and yet we do so many things that cause pain. The question is, why is that? Why don’t we realize what we’re doing and change our ways? Well, we can change our ways. Once we start to realize what we’re doing, we see the connection between our actions and the pain that they cause. Sometimes we don’t see the connection simply because we haven’t noticed it, and other times we will fully deny it because we have some other idea of what pleasure we get out of these things that cause us pain. And yet we deny the pain, or we deny that it’s a necessary part of what we’re doing, or we deny that there’s anything better. The essence of this is instructive. He says we suffer from clinging. In fact, the clinging to the aggregates is the suffering. The word for clinging also means sustenance. We feed off these things. So the question always is, what hit are you getting from things that cause pain? In other words, where is the pleasure that makes you want to deny the pain or ignore the pain, or just blot it out from your awareness? The Buddha lists four kinds of sustenance or clinging. The first one is sensuality. Sensuality has a lot of appeal. We’d like to think sensual thoughts. We’d like to contemplate how this pleasure is going to be good. And if it wasn’t quite what we want, well, we can tweak it a little bit and tweak it a little bit more, and we get a lot of satisfaction out of continually tweaking our fantasies. This is a really hard attraction to understand. We’re working on that book on humor in the Canon. The section devoted to sensuality is really interesting. It has two very beautiful poems put in the mouths of people who are totally deluded by sensuality. The beauty of the poems is to acknowledge the fact that there is a lot of glamour there. We have this tendency to think that the people who are beautiful or the people who are indulging sensuality in a very sophisticated way, those are the people we want to emulate, those are the people we want to admire. They have something we don’t have. And so the whole purpose of those poems put in the mouths of very deluded people is to show that the delusion behind that totally blots out any real glamour. And the glamour becomes ridiculous. So we have to learn how to look at our sensual pleasures and our fascination with sensual thinking to see how ridiculous it is. This requires that we work on our concentration. Because, as the Buddha said, you can see the drawbacks to sensuality and understand them. But if you don’t have another pleasure to rely on, something that’s more solid, and that’s not connected with sensuality, you’re just going to keep going back to your old sensual attractions. This is why concentration is so central to the path. You have to have a very positive attitude toward it. Some people are afraid of concentration, that they’ll get stuck on it or they won’t gain insight because of the concentration. But again, that’s sensuality speaking to you, trying to pull you back. Or your pride speaking to you, which is another form of clinging we’ll get to in a moment. Don’t be willing to stay with something that feels good inside, in what the Buddha calls form, i.e., the sense of the body as it’s felt from within, which is different from sensuality. The movement of the energy in the body as you breathe in, breathe out, working through patterns of tension, finding pleasure in that. This is all a good activity. And even though there may be some attachment there, that’s much better than your attachment to sensuality. One of the problems with addiction to any kind of clinging is that there’s a tendency not to be able to imagine yourself to do anything else, that this is the best you can find. And so the concentration is there to broaden your imagination, to help you realize that there are forms of sensual pleasure that are outdone, even the best sensual pleasures are outdone, like the pleasure of jhana. There’s a passage in the Canon where a novice is staying in a little woods, and this prince comes by in his morning exercise and sees the novice and says, “I’ve got a question for you.” The novice, knowing that the prince is a very proud person, says, “Okay, I’ll answer the question, but I don’t want any discussion beyond just the answer I give you, okay? Don’t question me about it. Don’t argue with me.” The prince says, “Okay.” So the question is, “Is it true that monks are able to go past sensual pleasures?” And the novice says, “Yes, it is.” And the prince says, “I don’t believe that.” End of conversation. The novice goes to see the Buddha, and the Buddha says, “You fool. You know that prince. There’s no way his imagination could get around the idea that there would be something beyond sensual pleasure in life.” So one of the reasons we practice concentration is to expand our sense of what’s possible and also what’s possible for us to do. This gets into some of the other forms of clinging. There’s clinging to habits and practices. You have your ways of doing things, and you don’t want to change. And part of this is because you can’t think of anything better to do. And there’s that sense of you yourself, what you are, who you are. A lot of our attachments go there. There’s a conceit. And we don’t like to think that there’s a better way of doing things than what we’ve already found. As long as your conceit gets in the way of the practice, it is a true obstacle to getting past your attachments, getting past your clingings, your addictions, whatever they may be. This relates to the fourth kind of clinging, which is views. You have your ideas about what’s true and what’s false, what’s connected to what you see. As the Buddha said, the central insight of discernment is seeing connections. Or, as John Lee says, if you see results but not the causes, or you see the causes but not the results, that’s not insight. You’ve got to see the connections between the two of them. And if your views get in the way of seeing those connections, if you say, “Well, this is not possible,” you have to look into why you’re holding on to something that causes you to suffer. The Buddha’s pointing out the fact that there are other possibilities in the world. And some people don’t follow them because they’ve never heard the Buddhist teachings, but other people have heard the Buddhist teachings and they’ll do everything they can to reject them. So you’ve got to look into what kind of clinging it is, where they’re getting their sustenance on that clinging, before you can help them get beyond it. Clinging to sensuality, clinging to an idea of what they are, their identity, gets really attached to a certain way of acting, way of behaving. There’s an attachment to the behavior itself, the things that we like to do regardless of what the outcome is, and just our views in general about what causes what and what kind of happiness is possible and what kind of happiness is impossible. For example, I’ve even heard Buddhist teachers say they don’t understand this idea of a timeless happiness that human beings could experience. And the problem there is their idea of what a human being is. And human beings, in their estimation, couldn’t experience anything timeless, because we’re totally time-bound creatures, they would say. That’s not the Buddha’s approach at all. He tried to find out what way of action leads to the ultimate happiness, and he found that it is possible. There are actions that can open the way to what is uncaused. From there he went back and looked at his ideas of what human beings are. He realized that there are so many ideas of what we are, what our self is, that they really get in the way of that happiness. Which is why he spent so little time talking about what people are, never defining what they are. In fact, he said, if you define yourself, you’re placing limitations on yourself. Instead, look at what you can do. Try to expand your imagination. Try to gain an education from what the Buddha had to say and expand your imagination of what’s possible for you to do. Get some practice in the skills of the path. And even though you may not be able to help other people get past their attachments to harmful or hurtful behavior, at the very least you can look at your own harmful or hurtful behavior and get past that. So look at where your clinging is, and in the clinging look at where you’re gaining some sense of feeding a desire. And be open to the idea that there are other desires, better desires, that can be fed without causing stress or harm. Expand your range of awareness. Expand your imagination. That’s how clingings can be overcome, and the suffering that goes along with the clinging. It requires a desire, a desire not to suffer, realizing you’ve had enough. Some people encounter just a little bit of pain and they’ve had enough of the pain of the world. Others seem to want to really hang on. It’s your choice. At what point you decide you’ve had enough and can follow that choice through.

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