Clinging & Its Cure

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One of the methods that the Buddha recommends when dealing with distracting thoughts is the relaxation of thought fabrications. More precisely, the relaxation of fabrications. What it comes down to is, you notice that when a thought comes into the mind and it grabs your attention, there’s going to be a little pattern of tension someplace in the body that’s your marker for keeping that thought in mind. And if you can locate that pattern of tension and release it, the thought goes away. Some people have called that “tensing up the clinging response.” And they say if you could just keep your energy throughout the body relaxed all the time, there would be no clinging. That would be the end of the problem. But the physical tension is the result of the clinging. It’s not the source. It’s one of the things that enables the clinging to stay. And you can do some symptom management. You notice you’ve got patterns of tension in the body that correspond to different thoughts. You can release the tension. This is one of the reasons why we go through the body, section by section. To release old patterns of tension or new patterns of tension. To clear things up a little bit. And also to allow you to step back from your clingings. But the clingings themselves are something else. After all, they’re mental. Patterns of tension are physical. People say, well, if you could be alert and mindful all the time and keep the body relaxed, you’d be fine. But the question is, well, why do you not stay alert to the whole body all the time? The mind tends to zoom in on things. It forgets the world of the body and it gets into another world, the world of a thought, the world of an idea. And that’s where the clinging happens. As the Buddha said, we have clinging to the aggregates. This is where he says that we’re clinging not so much to the aggregates themselves, but to our desire and passion for fabricating aggregates. It’s as if we have a particular skill. We’ve learned how to fabricate things. And we just love to keep fabricating. Because we realize that that’s where a lot of our happiness comes from, is changing the world, changing our experience by the way we fabricate it. The problem is we can also fabricate things pretty sloppily. Well, a lot of ignorance, and we end up causing suffering. The way out, of course, the Buddha says, is to fabricate a path. You take those aggregates and you turn them into concentration, you turn them into a right view. You turn them into all the factors of the path. And that will provide you with a way out. An important part of that is having right view about what the clinging is. The Buddha lists four kinds. There’s clinging to sensuality, clinging to views, clinging to habits and practices, and clinging to doctrines of the self. It may sound like a random list, but it corresponds to some things that have been noticed in modern psychology. Clinging to sensuality would correspond to what Freud called the id, your desires, raw desires for sensual pleasures. Clinging to views would be your sense of the reality principle, how the world actually is and how it works. Clinging to habits and practices would be your superego, the part of the mind that tells you what you should be doing, and what people at large should be doing. And then your sense of the self, that’s your ego, the part that’s trying to negotiate between your desires and your sense of what is proper, what is appropriate. Now in Freud’s view, those parts of the psyche are constantly in battle. Because the “shoulds” of the Judeo-Christian tradition don’t have much to do with your happiness. They’re just laws that have been laid down. But from the Buddhist point of view, the “shoulds” that he recommends, the “shoulds” of the Four Noble Truths, are designed specifically for your true happiness. So even though there’s a conflict in the mind, it doesn’t have to always be there. We have to understand these forms of clinging. We use them on the path, or at least some of them on the path. We also have to learn how to let go of the unskillful forms. The one form of clinging for which there is no role in the path is clinging to sensuality. Sensuality here means your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, planning sensual pleasures, and the Buddha’s not saying you should deny yourself sensual pleasures, but you should be very careful about the kinds of sensual pleasures you go for, and the amount to which you allow them, or your desire for those pleasures, to take over the mind. As he said, if there’s a sensual pleasure that you indulge in and it doesn’t have a bad impact on the mind, that’s okay. But if it requires that you break the precepts, or if it has an intoxicating effect on the mind, that’s something you’ll have to restrain yourself from. Now the substitute the Buddha gives there is the pleasure of concentration, but also the pleasure of knowing that your actions are harmless. There is a pleasure in virtue. There’s a pleasure in right view. Seeing things clearly. Think of all those people who listen to a Dhamma talk by the Buddha, and at the end they sing. It’s magnificent, magnificent. Like someone who’s carried a lamp into the dark, who’s turned upright, things that were turned over. Just seeing things clearly explained in a way that makes sense, and points out to the fact that you can play a role in putting an end to your suffering by changing your attitude, by changing your actions. That’s good news. There’s a pleasure that comes with accepting that, that there is a role for your agency in the world. Think about all the different teachings that were available in the Buddhist time. There’s so many of them that said the world just goes on its own way. Actions are unreal, or actions are impotent, pretty discouraging teachings. Here the Buddha comes and says, “Hey, you’re going to have to sacrifice some things, but it will lead to happiness.” And the people who were intelligent saw that as good news. So the Buddha is not having you deny yourself pleasure as you follow the path. It’s simply learning new pleasures, learning to appreciate the pleasures of virtue, the pleasures of being responsible, the pleasures of course of concentration. As for views, of course, he put aside a lot of views that were hotly debated at that time. Whether the world was eternal, not eternal, finite or infinite. But there was one issue on which he taught a lot, which is that basically karma and rebirth, that’s in his explanation, that’s really one issue. That’s a view that you hold to. Of course you hold to the view of the four Noble Truths. Your sense of habits and practices. Sometimes that’s translated as rites and rituals. I’ve known all too many people who say, “Well, I don’t believe in any rituals, I don’t believe in any rites, so I’ve got that one taken care of.” But we do have a strong sense of what should and shouldn’t be done. Even people who say, “Well, there is no should and shouldn’t be done.” They say, “Well, you shouldn’t have thoughts of should and shouldn’t be done. You shouldn’t have thoughts of right and wrong.” The Buddha said that an important part of his teaching was that he taught people some basic principles for understanding what they should and shouldn’t do. This is how they protect themselves from unskillful urges, unskillful ideas. Comes down, of course, to the precepts, the practice of virtue, concentration, discernment. You take on the Buddha’s shoulds because they’re good for you. He formulated them not because he wanted to impose his will on other people, but just because he liked rules. He formulated them because this is what works. You act on skillful intentions, the results are going to be good. You act on unskillful intentions, the results are going to be bad. Working out of that principle can be complex, but it gives you a clearer idea of what you should be doing. And then when there are no obvious shoulds from his precepts and rules, he gives you the principle for how to learn from your actions as to what actually works, what actually doesn’t work in being harmless. So the habits and practices he recommends as part of the path. And of course, doctrines of the self. He does talk about the self as its own mainstay. The self as its… It’s hard to think of the English word for the Pali, but the Pali basically comes down to that you should be the person who criticizes yourself and offers recommendations for how to improve your actions. What it comes down to is having a sense of self that is competent to do the path, takes responsibility for your actions, and who has a strong sense that you will benefit from doing this. The self falls into three types. There’s the self as the consumer, the you who’s going to enjoy the results of the path. Then there’s the self as the agent, the agent of you who’s actually going to do the path. And then self as the commentator, the part of you that’s watching over the activities of the other two senses of self, and making suggestions, passing judgment. And if it’s skillful, it’ll not only just pass judgment, say, “You could do it better this way.” Constructive criticism, that’s what it should be offering. An important part of the path is training these senses of self. You don’t just say, “Not self, no self.” There’s nobody here, nobody doing the path. That aborts the whole process. So you learn how to use skillful forms of clinging to stay on the path, to develop the path. And when the path is developed, that’s when you can think about letting go of all forms of clinging. It’s interesting, there’s some passages where the Buddha says, “The things that are in constant stress are not self.” What in there do you let go of? And he says, “You let go of the desire and passion.” And I say, “You don’t let go of the aggregates, you don’t let go of the senses, you let go of your desire and passion for fabricating things out of them.” Which is why when Arhats gain Awakening, and then they come back from the Awakening experience, they still experience the aggregates, but without desire and passion. So you learn how to use these things wisely. And look at how you relate to them. When we do those suttas on the… It’s not self-characteristic. And on the Vajra Sermon, notice the Buddha talks about how you develop disenchantment for the aggregates and disenchantment for the sense media. And he says, “From disenchantment, nibbida, you go to viraga, dispassion.” You notice, dispassion doesn’t have an object. It’s not just dispassion for the aggregates, it’s dispassion all around. And dispassion for passion itself. Ideally, that’s how it operates. It’s not limited just to dispassion for the aggregates and the sense media. It’s all around. Total. And that’s what liberates you. All too often we hear the word “dispassion” and it sounds gray, lifeless, dull. But the Buddha wants you to realize that it’s our passion for fabricating things which has gotten us into trouble. And it can help get us out of trouble, fabricating the path. But then you have to let go of the path too. When you lose your passion for fabricating the aggregates, clinging to the aggregates, that’s when the mind is liberated. And you realize that all that activity that you were so wound up in was actually getting in the way of something much better. Which is why awakening is such an unexpected experience. So that’s the cure for clinging. The real clinging is mental. The side effects in the body, if you can deal with those side effects, as I said, it’s part of symptom management. But it doesn’t affect the total cure. The total cure has to be done inside the mind as you see what you’re passionate about, what your desires are aiming at, what they’re clinging to. And you learn to see that you’re better off not clinging. That’s when you’ve really cured yourself of the clinging and allowed yourself to be free.

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