

Clinging & the End of Clinging

When the Buddha formulated his first noble truth—the truth of suffering and stress—he didn’t say something useless like, “Life is suffering,” or obvious like, “There is suffering.” Instead, he said something much more useful, insightful, and to the point: “Suffering is the five clinging-aggregates.” And as he explained elsewhere, the problem isn’t the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. It’s the clinging.

So when he said that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering, he was really saying that all he taught was clinging and the end of clinging. If we want to understand his teachings and get the most out of them, we have to comprehend what clinging is, why it’s suffering, and how he recommended bringing it to an end.

CLINGING

Clinging is something we do. This means that suffering is something we do: It’s an active, rather than a passive, verb. It’s also something with which we identify strongly. Our sense of self is composed of aggregates—which are also things we do—and identifying with that sense of self is one of the major forms of clinging. At the same time, the Pali word for clinging—*upādāna*—has a second meaning: to feed. The first noble truth is saying that we suffer from our feeding habits.

So it’s no wonder that many people resist the Buddha’s analysis of suffering. It’s as if he’s placing the blame for their suffering on them, and denying their right to find sustenance from the world. They’d rather hear that the world is making them suffer. They’d prefer a noble truth that let them continue feeding as they like and placed the blame for their suffering outside.

But the Buddha wasn’t focused on placing blame. Instead, he was interested in empowerment: If you had to wait—or fight—for outside conditions to be just right in order for you to stop suffering, the end of suffering would be forever beyond reach. But because suffering is something you do, you can change what you do and stop suffering. With empowerment comes responsibility: If you’re suffering from your feeding habits, it’s up to you to find a new way to feed, one that strengthens you to the point where you have no more hunger of any kind.

That’s a tall order. As the Buddha’s analysis shows, we suffer precisely because of our strongest attachments. The end of suffering requires that we sacrifice many of the things to which we’re most firmly attached: not only things that we identify as *ours*, but also many things we identify as *us*. But then, that’s

why this truth of suffering is a noble truth. Suffering itself isn't noble, but when you realize that you suffer because you cling, and you're willing to use the Buddha's analysis to rise above your clings, it's a noble act.

So this noble truth carries a noble duty: Instead of trying to run away from suffering, you have to comprehend it as clinging. Full comprehension means that you contemplate your clings to the point of ending all passion, aversion, and delusion around them. And because clinging itself is a form of desire and passion, once clinging is fully comprehended, it ends.

A first step in comprehending clinging is to identify the forms it takes. The Buddha lists four:

- Sensuality-clinging: passion and desire to find pleasure in fantasizing and planning sensual pleasures.
- View-clinging: passion and desire for views about how the world is structured and how it works.
- Habit-and-practice-clinging: passion and desire for ideas that tell you how you should act in the world.
- Doctrine-of-self-clinging: passion and desire for ways of defining who or what you are.

This list may sound arbitrary and abstract until you realize that the Buddha is talking about some very basic functions of the mind. Sensuality-clinging is all about what you *want* in terms of sensuality. View-clinging is all about your ideas about *what the world is* and *how it works*. Habit-and-practice clinging covers your ideas of how you have to act in the world to get what you want. It's all about your ideas of what you *should do*. And doctrine-of-self-clinging is all about your sense of yourself as (1) an *agent*, negotiating the way the world works and doing what needs to be done to find pleasure to feed (2) the *consumer* who will enjoy those pleasures once they're attained. These two functions of the self are your basic set of strategies for finding happiness.

The first three types of clinging define the arena in which your self acts and searches for happiness. The balance of power among the three will vary from person to person, and—even within a particular person—from moment to moment. If you want to reject all constraints on trying to fulfill your sensual fantasies, you might be inclined to accept a materialist deterministic worldview where sensual pursuits are not subject to moral judgments, and where the *shoulds* of the world counsel the pursuit of pleasure wherever you find it. This would be a case of sensuality-clinging dictating your view of the world. If you want to believe that your dignity as a human being lies in your ability to choose your actions, you'll be inclined to adopt a non-deterministic worldview where choice is real. This would be a case where habit-and-practice-clinging dictates your view of the world and what your attitude toward sensuality should be.

And of course, there are not a few cases where people change their worldview to fit in with their desires of the moment. There are also cases where their wants run up against the *shoulds* and *what is* of a worldview to which they're committed for other reasons. Modern psychology has detailed the suffering that comes from precisely this sort of conflict, one that's not limited only to those suffering from severe mental illness. It's a common feature of the human condition.

However, even though the first three types of clinging define the arena in which the self functions, the Buddha identified doctrine-of-self-clinging as the most basic type of clinging of all. As he stated, only in a teaching where this type of clinging is comprehended can people reach awakening. That's because your sense of who you are explains why you're invested in seeing the world a certain way and in believing that certain things should be done in order to attain what you want. Without your desire to gain pleasure for yourself, views of the world or of how you should act wouldn't have much hold on the mind.

This may be why, of all the different forms of clinging, this is the one where the Buddha focused the most attention on explaining how clinging gets fixated on the five aggregates. According to him, you can identify the self either as identical with any of the aggregates, as possessing any of the aggregates, as containing any of the aggregates, or as existing within any of the aggregates. These four possibilities multiplied by five aggregates give twenty possible self-identity views to which you might cling (SN 22:1).

Aside from doctrine-of-self-clinging, there's only one other instance where the Buddha specifies the relationship between clinging and the aggregates, and that's right concentration, which functions on the path as an example of habit-and-practice-clinging. He notes that any of the four jhānas that comprise right concentration are composed of the five aggregates, whereas any of the formless attainments based on the fourth jhāna are composed of the four mental aggregates (feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness). When we come to the central role that right concentration plays on the path to the end of clinging, we'll see why the Buddha gives even this much attention to the issue. Otherwise, he leaves it up to his listeners to figure out how any particular type of clinging translates into clinging-aggregates.

So it's obvious that doctrine-of-self-clinging is the most important type of clinging to comprehend. Its centrality may explain why some schools of Buddhism pay little attention to the other forms of clinging, and focus all their efforts on uprooting a sense of self.

They're right on one point, which is that the two roles of the self explain why clinging is suffering. The self-as-consumer, even though it enjoys feeding, is constantly hungry. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, that

wouldn't be enough to satisfy one person's sensual desires. This means that the self-as-agent has to be constantly at work—negotiating among wants and shoulds, trying to gain a measure of control over the way things are—all in order to assuage the hunger of the consumer, with never a moment's rest.

However, you can't uproot your sense of self without also uprooting your other forms of clinging as well. Given that the self is what negotiates the world and tries to figure out how to act to gain pleasure, its identity is strongly linked to its range of strategies and skills for finding what it wants. These, in turn, rely on how it sees *what is* and *what should be done*. You see this connection most clearly when you move into a different culture or when your own society undergoes radical change. The world is no longer what it used to be, the skills that used to get results come up empty-handed, and your very identity gets called into question. To survive, you have to construct a new self around new skills for negotiating the new arena in which you act.

So—given that the roots of the self are entangled in its wants, its worldviews, and its ideas of what should be done—if you want to uproot your sense (or senses) of self, you also have to uproot the other three types of clinging: your attitude toward sensuality and your sense of how you should act, given your views on how the world works.

THE END OF CLINGING

Because desire is the motive force for all conditioned things, the first order of business in putting an end to suffering is to see the end of clinging as a desirable goal. And because sensuality-clinging plays no role on the path to the end of clinging, you have to see the pleasure of sensuality as an inferior goal, and freedom from sensuality as potentially desirable.

This goes against some firmly ingrained habits. After all, it was because of sensuality that we took birth here in the human realm. Even the Buddha himself said that when he realized he would have to abandon sensuality to progress on the path, his heart didn't leap up at the prospect. Only when he admitted the drawbacks of sensuality, and saw renunciation as freedom and rest, did he actually get to work on abandoning his fascination with sensuality.

The way he did this is suggested by the way he taught other people to do it. There were many cases where he wanted to teach the four noble truths to his listeners, but because they didn't yet see the rewards of renunciation, they wouldn't fully benefit from hearing those truths. So—unlike university professors who plunge their students into the four noble truths on day one of Buddhism 101—he first prepared his listeners' minds with what he called a graduated talk (MN 56). First he described the joys of giving, then the joys of being virtuous, and then the pleasurable rewards that come from both generosity

and virtue in the sensual heavens—rewards that far outweigh the rewards in this life.

Once his listeners were attracted to the idea that the best way to attain sensual bliss was through generosity and virtue, he turned the tables on them by pointing out the drawbacks even of heavenly sensual pleasures: As you enjoy those pleasures, you get addicted and heedless, abandoning the good practices that got you to heaven to begin with. It's as if *samsāra* were a sick joke. You work hard, developing good qualities of mind to gain long-lasting sensual pleasures, but then the act of enjoying those pleasures has a corrosive effect on the good qualities that produced them. The mind deteriorates as it grows accustomed to having its wants all met, that deterioration eventually causes it to fall, and you're back where you started—if not worse.

When this realization inspires a sense of dismay, you begin to appreciate the idea that the only true happiness would lie in getting out of this trap. That's when you're ready for the four noble truths.

Now, notice what the Buddha is doing in the course of giving this talk. To pry you away from your attachment to sensuality, he's providing you with a way of viewing the world in which a certain course of action—renunciation of sensuality—is an obvious *should* because it leads to your long-term welfare and happiness, with “you” defined in terms of multiple lifetimes. In other words, he's recommending new objects of view-clinging and doctrine-of-self-clinging that will help get you started on the habits and practices of the path.

As the talk explains, we live in a world where good actions are rewarded, both in this lifetime and in future ones. We ourselves are beings who will survive death—as we have already survived death many times—to enjoy the results of our actions. The talk itself explains the rewards and limitations of our actions in leading to sensual pleasure now and into the distant future, while the four noble truths explain a path of action that leads away from the incessant round of lifetimes of sensual pleasure alternating with pain and toward a happiness totally unconditioned.

The noble truths also propose an interim pleasure—the pleasure, rapture, and equanimity of right concentration, the last factor in the fourth noble truth—that will form an alternative object of desire to replace your desires for sensuality. This non-sensual pleasure will be your food along the way, so that you're not tempted to go back to sensuality even as you understand its drawbacks (MN 14). In effect, he's offering a skillful type of habit-and-practice clinging to replace sensuality-clinging as your source of inner food.

This means that the path to the end of clinging uses interim versions of three kinds of clinging: view-clinging, habit-and-practice-clinging, and doctrine-of-

self-clinging. You hold on to the raft composed of these three forms of clinging until you get to the further shore. Only then do you let them go.

Of the three, habit-and-practice-clinging is the most pivotal. After all, the path to the end of clinging is a path of action—what the Buddha called the kamma that puts an end to kamma—which is why his teachings go into great detail on the habits and practices of virtue, concentration, and discernment that should be developed to form the path. However, to believe that such a path could actually work, you need a view about the world in which actions can be freely chosen and have the power to transcend the round of death and rebirth. This is why right views about kamma and rebirth also form part of the path.

At the same time, you need to have a sense that you, as an agent, are capable of following the path, and that you, as a consumer, will benefit from doing so. This is why, as part of his strategy for motivating you to engage in the path factor of right effort, the Buddha provided many teachings to encourage a healthy sense of self, saying that the self is its own mainstay, that it's responsible for its actions, that it's capable of mastering the path, and that it will benefit from doing so.

But it's worth noting that even though the early teachings are very detailed in their instructions as to what should and shouldn't be done, the worldviews and self-views they provide in support of these instructions are only sketches. Many issues were at play in the worldviews actively discussed during the Buddha's time, but he focused only on views related to the nature of action, its powers, and the patterns of causality by which it brings about results. Karma and rebirth, for instance, were hotly debated by his contemporaries, so he had to take a position on those issues to justify the path of practice he taught. The size and age of the cosmos were also hot topics, but because they had no bearing on the power of action, the Buddha put those topics aside.

Similarly with issues of the self: Other philosophical schools debated the question of how best to define the self, but the Buddha noted that to define yourself was to limit yourself, so he refused to answer questions about what the self was—or even whether it existed. As he said, questions of that sort weren't worthy of attention (MN 2). All he was concerned about was your *perception* of self: responsible for your actions, competent to follow the path, and able to benefit from doing so. That's all.

This means that attempts in later centuries to turn the Buddha's sketches of a worldview and a self-view into complete maps of a cosmos and detailed diagrams of what-you-are were beside the point. It also means that modern-day demands that Buddhist teachings be fit into modern or post-modern ideas of how the world works and what a person is are also misguided. The Buddha meant for his world-sketches and self-sketches to be precise and uncluttered,

pared down to the absolute essentials. They stuck to the basics needed for practice and provided no more handles for clinging than were need for holding on to the raft.

In fact, the question of action was so central to the path to the end of clinging that one of the crucial steps in the path was to learn how to see how your sense of the world and yourself were nothing more than actions themselves. They come about from things you *do*.

One of the most basic ways in which the Buddha introduced this lesson concerned three reflections he recommended for motivating you to stick with the practice at times when you're feeling discouraged, your mind is overcome by unskillful thoughts, and you're tempted to give up. The first reflection he called the self as a governing principle; the second, the world as a governing principle; and the third, the Dhamma as a governing principle (AN 3:40).

To take the self as a governing principle is to remind yourself that you took on the practice because you were beset by aging, illness, and death, and you wanted to find an end to this mass of suffering and stress. The implication here is that you loved yourself when you started practicing. Do you not love yourself now? As you reflect in this way, you feel motivated to get back on the path.

This reflection helps you to see how your sense of self changes—and how you have the power to choose which sense of self you want to identify with: the self that loves itself, or the self that wants to give up on the possibility of putting an end to suffering. The choice is yours.

Similarly with the world as a governing principle: You remind yourself that there are beings in the world who can read minds. What if they're reading your mind now? What will they think? As you reflect in this way, you rededicate yourself to making an effort in the practice.

Here again, the Buddha is asking you to change your view of the world, from one in which unskillful thoughts make sense, to one in which unskillful thoughts are an embarrassment and in which there are beings who are concerned for your welfare. Reflecting on this, you see that your view of the world is the result of your own actions, and you can choose to focus on aspects of the world that encourage you to straighten out your mind and stick with the path.

To take the Dhamma as a governing principle is to reflect on the excellence of the Dhamma and the fact that there are those who, through the practice of the Dhamma, are directly experiencing the Dhamma of the goal. How can you let yourself be lazy and heedless when this opportunity is at hand? Here again, as you think in this way, you feel motivated to get back to the practice that leads to that Dhamma.

Of these three reflections, the Dhamma as a governing principle is central. It's because of the excellence of the Dhamma that the other two reflections make

sense and can actually motivate you to practice. The excellence of the Dhamma is what makes you want it, and your desire for that excellence is the reason why sticking with the practice is a way of showing love for your best-intentioned self. It's also why the concern of other beings for you to stick with the practice is a concern that should be honored.

Now, all of these reflections are related to the three types of clinging used on the path. Self as a governing principle is obviously related to doctrine-of-self-clinging, world as a governing principle is related to view-clinging. The relationship between the Dhamma as a governing principle to habit-and-practice-clinging is not quite so obvious, but it's there. The Dhamma referred to in the reflection is the Dhamma of awakening, but the purpose of the reflection is the same as that of the other reflections: to get you to do what needs to be done—to develop the habits and practices of the path—that will take you to that excellent Dhamma.

This is just one of the ways in which views of the world and the self are shown to be actions, and in which habit-and-practice-clinging acts as the central form of clinging used on the path.

Another example of how the Buddha has you use clinging on the path is related to his five-step program for dealing with unskillful thoughts that will pull you away from the practice. When a sensual desire or a wrong view about action threatens to pull you out of concentration, he recommends that you look at the thought in question as an action, a type of clinging, and then follow four steps: observing (1) the origination of the clinging—what causes it to arise; (2) its falling away; (3) its allure; and (4) its drawbacks. When you see that the allure is far outweighed by the drawbacks, you develop dispassion for it, which is step (5): escape.

The crucial step here is to develop an acute sensitivity to the drawbacks. This is where the Buddha recommends analyzing the thought in question as an action, and applying three perceptions to it: It's inconstant and stressful, so why perceive it as you or belonging to you? You should actually perceive it as not-self.

What's interesting here is that the motivation for applying this last perception is that *you* will benefit from it. In the passages where the Buddha has you reflect on the rewards of applying the perception of not-self even toward the last stages of the practice, the reflections are phrased in terms of "I" and "mine": "My my-making will be stopped. I'll be endowed with uncommon knowledge." (AN 6:104) Or when he told the monks to abandon attachment to what was not theirs, he phrased the motivation as: "Whatever's not yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term happiness and benefit." (SN 35:101) So in these cases, even with the perception of not-self, the Buddha is using a sense of "you"

as motivation to keep you focused on following the habits and practices of the path.

Of course, given that all clinging is suffering, even skillful forms of clinging ultimately have to be transcended if we want suffering to end. To do that, we have to develop a level of right view that, once the path is fully developed, allows us to abandon the path as well. Here again, the Buddha recommends taking his five-step program and applying it to the skillful qualities developed on advanced stages of the path. He lays out the steps in several ways, but two are worthy of note.

The first starts by focusing directly on habit-and-practice-clinging. He has you apply the perceptions of drawbacks to the practice of concentration and discernment themselves. AN 9:36 shows how this is done. First you analyze your state of concentration into the five aggregates that comprise it. Then you apply the three perceptions, or variations of them, to those aggregates. As you develop dispassion even for the subtle pleasure and equanimity of concentration on the grounds that they're fabricated, you incline the mind to the unfabricated. Then, as fabrications fall away and you discern the deathless, you have to be careful not to cling even to that act of discernment. As you develop dispassion for it, your dispassion becomes all-around, there's nothing left to cling to, and you can reach total unbinding.

The second approach starts by focusing on view-clinging, but quickly changes focus to habit-and-practice-clinging as well. The Buddha recommends viewing the world as nothing more than the six senses—the five physical senses plus the mind—and the activities based on them. Then he has you see the six senses and their objects as old kamma, and everything you do based on them as new kamma (SN 35:145). This is where the focus shifts to habits and practices. To develop dispassion for both types of kamma, he recommends observing the world so-defined as simply originating and passing away. When you focus on these things originating from moment to moment, the concept of "non-existence" with regard to the world doesn't occur to you. When you focus on their passing away, the concept of "existence" with regard to the world doesn't occur to you. This means that there's nothing left to cling to in terms of the world (SN 12:15).

At the same time, all you see is stress arising and stress passing away. You realize that no matter where you focus your attention, there's going to be nothing but stress. This induces a sense of dispassion for all action: You can't go anywhere else, and you can't stay where you are, without entailing more stress. The Buddha described this paradoxical moment with a simile: It's like crossing a river without moving forward or staying in place (SN 1:1). The constraints of space fall away, and there's nothing you can do. There's nothing left to cling to in terms of habits and practices.

When there's no world in which to function, and nothing left to choose in terms of actions, the sense of self loses its reason for being—there's nothing to control, nothing to negotiate—and so it falls away, too. This is how the deepest form of clinging gets abandoned.

And that's when there's an opening to absolute release, totally hunger-free.

It's in this way that our feeding habits come to an end: not because we force ourselves not to eat, but because we've found a state where there's no need to feed.

Our situation as we ordinarily go through life is like being trapped in a birdcage. As long as we cling to the bars of the cage, we can't get out. But one wall of the cage contains a door. If you hold on to the bars of the door—the types of clinging used on the path—then when the door swings open, you're out of the cage. You're free. And as the Buddha said, from that point on, like birds flying through space, you leave no trace.

— *Thanissaro Bhikkhu*