

Stubborn Clinging

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The term “becoming” refers to the mind’s habit of taking on an identity in a world of experience. This can refer to our sense of the world outside and our identity within that world, whether it’s the social world or the physical world. But “world” can also refer to worlds in the mind. As you meditate, you’re actually taking on a state of becoming. The world here is the world of form: your sense of the body from within. For the time being, your identity is that you’re the person staying with this sense of form: looking after the breath, making sure your attention stays with the breath, making sure your thoughts stay with the breath, trying to be sensitive to how your thinking has an effect on the breath. You’re monitoring this at the same time as you’re doing it, creating the sense of concentration inside.

Ajaan Lee was once teaching an old scholarly monk in Bangkok how to meditate. At one point the older monk complained. He said, “Wait a minute, we’re supposed to be doing away with states of becoming but when we’re meditating it seems like we’re creating one.” And Ajaan Lee said, “That’s precisely what we’re doing: We’re creating a state of becoming.” He went on to say, “It’s like having a chicken that gives eggs. You don’t just destroy all the eggs. You learn how to eat some of them.” He didn’t complete the image, but if you want to learn about eggs, you need to eat in order to have the strength to learn. So you have to eat some of the eggs you’re studying. But that doesn’t deprive you of eggs to study, because in eating the eggs, you have to cook them first, and in cooking them you learn a lot about eggs.

So as you’re meditating on the breath, you’ve got good eggs to eat. The mind has lots of other ways of eating that you don’t want to get involved with right now. Every state of becoming has to depend on clinging, and the Buddha’s word for clinging—*upadana*—is the same word for taking sustenance or feeding on things. So every state of becoming has to be based either on feeding on views, feeding on habits and practices, or feeding on your sense of yourself. Some states of becoming feed on sensual desires: your fascination with thinking about sensual plans, those worlds you create in your mind around the sensual pleasure you want to get from food or people or whatever. That kind of food can be bad for you.

So as we develop a state of concentration here in the mind, we’re training the mind to feed in a better way. You notice as you go through life that the more skills you have, the wider the range of different senses of self you can develop around those skills. You have an enlarged sense of what you can manipulate, what you control, and if one set of skills doesn’t help in a situation, you can try another. Mastering concentration gives you a new range in which to move and exert control, which is really liberating because so often we get tied up in our unskillful, unhealthy worlds: states of becoming where we’re clinging to unhealthy views of who we are or what the world should be like or how things should be done. We can get really tied up in who’s right and who’s wrong. Some people are so thoroughly enmeshed in their worlds that you wonder if they’re ever going to get out. They totally resist any effort to push them out or to lure them out or to persuade them that where they are is not in their best interest.

You’ve also got characters like that in your own head: certain identities you take on in certain situations, especially when you feel you’ve been wronged. The part of you that feels wronged wants to have justice served. You don’t like to hear the idea that maybe you’re the one who caused the problem. Or even if the other person really is wrong, the fact that you’re suffering here can’t totally be blamed on the other person. Sometimes you try to talk to that mind state about letting go and not carrying on with that particular fight, and it will really resist. That sense of having been wronged is probably one of our strongest manifestations of our sense of self. Even though you’re banging your head against the wall, if someone then tells you, “You know, you really don’t

need to bang your head against the wall,” there’s a strong part that resists. It defines itself by the pain it’s creating, and if it stops, it’s afraid it’ll be annihilated.

This is when you have to gather the different members of your committee around, to show that there are alternative ways of living in this world, ways that don’t involve so much frustration and pain. That’s one of the reasons why we develop the skill of bringing this new member to the committee: the member that’s good at getting the mind into concentration and keeping it there with a sense of wellbeing, a sense of fullness and rapture, refreshment, a very gratifying sense of serenity. This gives you an alternative place to stay. It gives you a new identity to take on as you try to deal with the more stubborn and heedless members that have been bullying the rest of the committee for so long.

Now this doesn’t mean that once the mind gets a good state of concentration like this, it’s going to automatically slip out of its unhealthy states. That’s where discernment has to come in. This is why the Buddha taught the four noble truths, why he began the path with the four noble truths: pointing out first that our clinging is suffering. This is the essence of all the mind’s sufferings: its ways of clinging to the five aggregates. The recognition of this suffering—the stress, the pain you’re causing yourself—and the recognition that it’s not necessary: Those are the only things that are going to get you out of those really stubborn mind states.

That and respect for the teaching. There are times when these mind states are so stubborn that they won’t listen to anybody. When that’s the case, it helps if some place in the mind there’s a seed of the attitude that maybe the Buddha really did know what he was talking about, and maybe settling scores in the world is not what life is about, and maybe feeding on the injustices that you’ve suffered is a really miserable way of feeding. Maybe there’s something better. When you have respect for that attitude, respect for that possibility, that’s when you have an out.

So one of the duties of discernment is to notice where your stubbornness is: the stubbornness that really likes to hold on to your sensual fantasies, your sexual fantasies, lust, whatever, for people, for things, food, or your very strong views about what’s right and wrong, your strong views of the right way of doing things—“It has to be done this way, it can’t be done any other way”—or your strong views of who you are and when you feel you’ve been wronged. You’ve got to learn how to ferret out that stubbornness and see how to get around it by noticing the suffering inherent in that kind of clinging. To have respect for the Buddha’s teachings is a big help.

The Buddha recognized that this is an important part of teaching the Dhamma—i.e., of one person teaching another person the Dhamma and also of you teaching yourself the Dhamma. There has to be an element of respect along with the realization that no matter how right you may be, if there’s suffering involved in that rightness, something’s wrong. You also need to realize that when you’re willing to step back from that sense of rightness, it’s not like you’re abandoning a fight or foregoing the justice you might feel you deserve. You’re doing it because you’re suffering and you don’t have to.

You see people suffering really miserable events, and some of them are scarred for the rest of their lives. They just can’t get over that particular sorrow, that particular loss. And yet other people who’ve suffered the same sort of thing can realize that feeding on that loss is not helping anybody and so they’re able to drop it. Which sort of person do you want to be?

If you want to be the second sort, you need to learn how to develop the skills to deal with all the places where the mind is stubborn, holding on to its opinions, holding on to its rightness. Realize that you’re the one who’s suffering and you’re the one causing it. Other people may have created bad outside conditions for you, but you’re the one stabbing yourself with them. They’ve put knives in your path, but you’re the one picking them up to injure yourself, repeatedly. How much longer do you want to carry it on?

So when we talk about respect for the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, it’s not just a matter of bowing down. Admittedly, we do a lot of bowing down around here. It’s partly to inculcate the attitude that maybe there’s somebody who knows more than we do. Respect for the Dhamma means realizing that you don’t have

to suffer and it's your choice. Do you want to continue feeding in ways that give rise to suffering? Or do you have respect for the alternative where you don't have to suffer? This requires swallowing some of your pride. But swallowing your pride is a better way of feeding than continuing to feed off your sense of having been wronged.

Actually, when you let go of your pride, you don't swallow it. You spit it out.

So this is what it always comes down to: learning to spit out all the unhealthy food you've been gobbling down. Do you still want to keep suffering in your rightness, or have you had enough? When you find parts of the mind that resist the Dhamma, what can you do to soften them up a bit? That's a lot of the practice right there. The concentration helps in softening these things up because you keep reminding yourself: "I do have this other skill. I have this place of wellbeing that doesn't have to depend on settling old scores out there in the world, doesn't have to depend on the world outside at all. And wouldn't I be better off adopting the perspective that comes from taking that as my main center, my main source of food?"