

Analyzing Suffering

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The Buddha once said that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. He analyzed suffering so that we can put an end to it, so it's good to look at his analysis. After all, this is why we're quieting the mind, so that we can actually look at suffering, comprehend it, in the terms that he pointed out—because suffering is *the* big issue in life. Everything else becomes an issue because it's related to suffering in one way or another. If you can focus on this issue, you take care of everything else.

And because it is such a big issue, the Buddha tries to break it down. He talks about suffering in various terms in different contexts, but his most condensed analysis is the five clinging-aggregates. Form as a clinging-aggregate, feeling as a clinging-aggregate, perception, fabrication, and consciousness as clinging-aggregates. He talks about the aggregates to help make suffering a bit more impersonal. We tend to identify so much with our sufferings. Our strongest sense of our self is around the areas where we've suffered in life, particularly if we feel that we were unjustly treated. That's where our strongest sense of self gets centered. So he divides suffering into the five aggregates to help take it apart and make it more impersonal.

But they're not just aggregates, they're the clinging-aggregates, and the clinging is what makes them suffering. So it's good to focus on the issue of clinging as well.

The Buddha analyzes clinging into four types: clinging to sensuality, to views, to precepts and practices, and to doctrines of the self. These are our strategies for happiness. The reason we cling to things is because we hope to control them.

Actually, the aggregates are not things, they're activities. Form is active in that it's always disintegrating, always changing. Feeling is active in that it feels pleasure or pain. Perception is active in that it perceives things like colors. In other words, it can label blue as blue, and green as green, and red as red. Fabrication is what takes the potentials for each of these aggregates and tries to turn them into actual aggregates. It takes a potential for feeling and changes it into an actual feeling, and so on down the line. So fabrication is involved in all of the aggregates.

This is important because fabrication is essentially intention. This means that there's an intentional element in all of our suffering. We might not like the idea

that we are responsible for our suffering, but the fact that we have a hand in our suffering means that we can change it. The fact that there is an intentional element in suffering means that there's a way out, because we can change our intentions.

Finally, consciousness. It's very similar to perception but it's more passive: consciousness of different sensations, sensations at the eye, ear, tongue, nose, body, mind—basic bare awareness of these things.

These are all activities. Clinging to these activities means that we keep trying to do them again and again and change them into other activities so that they're better. We change them for the sake of other aggregates. This is why it's such a futile process. We think that a particular feeling, say, is our self, or that having a particular view in and of itself will give us security, will give us peace, will give us purity. So we develop other views as means to get to that view, with the feeling that there's one that can be an end in and of itself.

But the problem is that all these aggregates are activities, and as such they're part of a causal chain. We think we've got something when we've formed a new aggregate, but then it turns into a process of change, so we have to keep at it, again and again and again. This obsession with trying to get happiness out of the aggregates: That's basically what the clinging is all about. We try to control them and set them up in ways that will have us comfortable in a secure way, but then they keep crumbling away.

In other words, you can't take the aggregates as ends in and of themselves even though we try. This is essentially what clinging is all about. We're trying to find some aggregates as ends to be attained—usually, the aggregate of feeling: We want a happiness that we can hold on to. But then it slips between our fingers. Some people feel that the solution is not to think that it's going to be a totally satisfactory happiness, just be content with the idea that it's always going to change and learn how to live in that changingness, accept it. But that's suffering. Nobody can stay that way for long. You end up finding that you surreptitiously start hanging on to other ideas, you have other views.

This view is one that people hold onto very tightly: the idea that everything is all about acceptance. "That's the way it is," they say, and they think that they've ended the discussion, ended the issue, but they haven't. It just goes underground. So we want to look very carefully at, one, what are things that we cling to as ends in and of themselves, and two, how we cling.

The first clinging is to sensuality. We think that our sensual desires will bring us happiness. The Buddha pointed out that we're actually more attached to our desires than we are to the objects of the desires. If you doubt that, think about this: If you were told that you can't have the object you desire, you'd feel some frustration, but then you'd go and find something else to desire, and try to get that. That's the way we operate throughout life. But if you were told that you not only couldn't have the object, you couldn't have the desire itself—no desire, at all—the mind would feel totally hemmed in. It feels that it's obviously suffering from stress or suffering in one way or the other, and at the very least, desire offers a way out. As the Buddha pointed out, we're particularly attached to sensual desires because we can't imagine that there's any other alternative to pain.

This is one of the ways we cling to the aggregates, particularly to the perceptions and fabrications that deal with sensuality. You can get totally obsessed in a sensual pleasure, thinking about it for hours and hours, in hopes of finding some satisfaction there. But as the Buddha points out, it's never really lasting, and often brings on more pain than satisfaction.

Another way of clinging is through views. We cling to certain perceptions and ideas and ways of looking at things as a view that will offer us security. The most common ones in the Canon are when you hold to a view that says, "This is true, everything else is false," and somehow that holding that view, in and of itself, will constitute purity or constitute a state of security. This type of clinging, however, doesn't cover just fixed opinions, it also covers skepticism or openness to all ideas: the idea that every opinion has its truth, and then just staying there with the idea that that puts you in a secure place, nobody can attack you, you're safe, you're open-minded, nobody can accuse you of being close-minded. But you just hold on to the view. It doesn't go anywhere. You can be attached to a view of total acceptance or you can be attached to a view of broad-mindedness. That's another form of clinging.

The third one is to precepts and practice. Most often this has to do with rituals, saying that somehow by following a ritual way of practice, you're going to gain security. It also can refer to our little private rituals, the ways we feel we have to do things. There's a story about Konrad Lorenz, the biologist. He was raising goslings and he had one left. Apparently, the mother goose died shortly after the goslings were born, so Konrad Lorenz took over their care. Of course, the one who was left fixated on Konrad Lorenz as its mother. When Konrad Lorenz was

outside, the gosling would follow him around wherever he went. This was during the summer.

As the fall approached and it started getting cold, he realized he was going to have to bring the gosling—which now was getting fairly sizeable—inside the house. So one day instead of feeding it outside, he just walked inside, left the door open, and the gosling followed him in for the first time in his life. As soon as it got inside, it freaked out. It'd never been in an enclosed place before. The hall was built in such a way that it went down to a window, and halfway down the hall on the right side was a stairway that led up to Konrad Lorenz's apartment. The gosling, immediately on seeing the window, went running for the window, thinking it'd be able to get outside. It got to it and realized that it couldn't.

Meanwhile, Konrad Lorenz had gone up the stairs. He called to the gosling, so the gosling turned around, followed him up the stairs, and had his meal. Then every day from then on, when the gosling would follow him into the house, it'd go straight to the window and then come back and go up the stairway. As time passed, the trip to the window got shorter and shorter, until finally the gosling would go to that side of the stairway, shake his foot in the direction of the window, and then go up the stairs.

One night, Konrad Lorenz came home from work late. The gosling was very hungry, so as soon as it got through the door, it ran straight up the stairs. But then it stopped halfway up the stairs, started shivering all over, and then very methodically went down the stairs, walked over to the window, and then back up the stairs, and went up for his meal.

This is the way we live our lives. We're attached to certain ways of doing things and think that if we don't do them that particular way, there's going to be trouble. The pattern of our behavior—say, even just slow eating, slow walking, all the rituals we develop around meditation—can also sometimes be classed as precepts and practices.

Finally, *the* major form of clinging is clinging to the aggregates as our self. We identify with a certain kind of feeling, a certain perception, a certain way of fabricating our thoughts. It's not necessarily the case that we hold on to one particular thing as our self all the time. If you looked at the pattern of your self-identification, you would see that it constantly shifts around. Sometimes you hold on to a feeling, sometimes to a perception, sometimes to the body, sometimes to

consciousness, sometimes to a mixture of the different ones. But this is the big underlying attachment, the big underlying clinging.

The word the Buddha uses for clinging, *upadana*, can also mean “feeding.” We take sustenance from these things, either in feeding on them or as fuel for a fire. In fact, this is where a lot of the imagery comes together. This process of trying to find happiness among the khandhas is like a fire constantly burning. We’re tinkering with this khandha, tinkering with that one, holding on to it, trying to gain some sort of sustenance, some sort of happiness out of it, the way a fire clings to its fuel. It just keeps burning and burning and burning away, jumping from one piece of fuel to another. We either identify with an aggregate or we think that the aggregate is ours, or that the aggregate is in us, or we’re in the aggregate.

These views of self are not just small, egotistical, separate selves. They can also be a larger, connected sense of self or a sense of being one with the cosmos. In other words, your body and feelings are in this larger self. That also counts as a form of clinging.

This is how we suffer. If you want to understand your sufferings, you have to look at them in these terms.

Now, the quick knee-jerk reaction to hearing about this would be, “Well, we’ve got to let go of these things, so okay I’ll let go.” But it’s threatening, if you actually look at the way you deal with life. It’s like being asked to give up control. The mind will balk. It’s being deprived of its basic means of finding happiness.

So the Buddha doesn’t have you drop the aggregates right away, and he actually doesn’t have you totally drop clinging right away. He has you take the aggregates and turn them into a path. After all, when you’re practicing concentration, you’ve got the breath, which is form, and you’ve got the feelings of pleasure that you’re trying to develop out of the breath. You’ve got the perception that keeps you with the breath. You’ve got the fabrications of directed thought and evaluation, along with the breath, which counts as a physical fabrication. And then there’s the consciousness of all these things.

So that’s what you do. You take the aggregates and turn them into a path, instead of trying to regard them as objects of sensual desire, as yourself, as ritualistic ways of doing things, or as a view that you hold on to. You turn them into a means. In other words, you take all aggregates, regardless, as means to an end, an end that is not aggregates, i.e., the end, which is nibbana.

This is a subtle, but a very important, shift. You take all this process of holding on to the aggregates and you hold on to them in a new way, not with the obsessiveness of clinging, but you still hold on to them.

There's a role for sensuality, and views, and precepts and practices, and ideas of the self in all of this. In other words, you don't go into total sensual denial, saying, "I'm not going to allow myself to enjoy food, I'm not going to allow myself to have any comfort at all." That's self-affliction, which is one of the extremes that the Buddha avoided. At the same time, you avoid sensual indulgence. You try to find the middle way, where you feed the body enough to get along. Keep it comfortable enough so that it can function. Find pleasure in the wilderness. Even Ven. Maha Kassapa has a long passage talking about the beauties of the wilderness, because it's a conducive place to practice. He doesn't go out there just to enjoy the wilderness or to enjoy the sensory pleasures of the wilderness, but to use that pleasant abiding as a place where he could really devote himself to the practice.

As for views, after all, there is *right* view in the path. In other words, it's a view that's not taken as an end in and of itself, and it's not just a general broad-minded acceptance of the potential truth of all views. It's realizing that there are specific views that are really helpful as guides to action in putting an end to suffering. So you take them on as tools. Views about karma, views about the nature of suffering and the four noble truths: These are useful views for the purpose of putting an end to suffering. So you hold on to those.

As for precepts and practices, after all, the Buddha does give the precepts for us to follow, and there's the practice of jhana. Here again, you follow these practices as a means to an end.

Then there are views of the self. Your idea of who you are is going to change as you practice. You don't totally abandon any sense of "I" until you reach the state of arahantship. Even non-returners have a lingering sense of "I." But in the beginning, you use that sense of self as a means, realizing that if you want true happiness, you have to point all your activity in the direction of nibbana. You have to be responsible. You have to be willing to give up immediate gratification for the sake of longer-term happiness. All this requires a very healthy sense of self, and the Buddha is clear about that. He says the self has to be its own mainstay. But you're using it not as an end in and of itself. You're using it as a means, learning to get a more and more refined idea of what's worth holding on to as self, and what's worth letting go as not-self.

So you start holding on to the states of concentration. You can get very, very attached to them. But there does come a point where you realize that if you're going to move on in the practice, you have to learn how to let go. But in the course of mastering the concentration, you become a much stronger, much more confident person. You've seen the happiness that comes from letting go, which makes it easier finally to let go of your ultimate attachments.

As the Buddha said, the ultimate attachment is to these very high states of jhana, the equanimity that comes with neither perception nor non-perception. That's the ultimate clinging. But if you learn from the practice to this extent, you realize, okay, true happiness comes from letting go even of that amount of attachment. You let go. In that case, you don't feel threatened, because turning the aggregates into a path has given you a whole new set of strategies. You hold on to them as you need them and then you learn to let them go when you don't.

That changes your whole relationship to them. You no longer feel so threatened by the idea of letting go. It becomes more and more positive, because you've seen the results that come from letting go in a wise and skillful way.

When you reach that state, then there's no more burning. You abandon all the fuel. This is why the image for the goal is nibbana, "the going out of the flame." This doesn't mean that you go out of existence, simply that all the feeding and agitation that comes with clinging is no longer there. As the Buddha said, just as if when a flame goes out, you can't say whether it's gone east, west, north, or south, in the same way, when there's no more clinging, you're no longer defined. When you're no longer defined, you can't be described in any way. Total limitless freedom.

So when we let go, we let go in an intelligent way, not just by trying to drop everything. That doesn't work because we deprive ourselves of the strategies we need to gain true happiness. And the mind balks. It'll find surreptitious ways of holding on, clinging no matter what.

So you learn how to let go in stages. Try to convert these aggregates, from being ends in and of themselves to being means to an end outside of the aggregates. Take this whole process of clinging and holding on to the aggregates and be more conscious about it, be more deliberate about it, have a sense of focus, a sense of priorities. Even though there may be stress involved with the path, at least it's stress that leads to a higher purpose. It, too, becomes a means to an end. The pleasure of the practice becomes a means to an end that's outside of the

aggregates. Once you've reached there, then you can totally let go. It's a more natural process, a more skillful process than just trying to drop everything and claim to be like the person who lets go of the raft in the middle of the river, or lets go of the ladder halfway up. You hold on until you get to the shore and *then* you let go. In the meantime, learn to hold on skillfully. That's the way out.

That's how the Buddha's way of analyzing suffering helps lead to the end of suffering. It really is one teaching. Often you hear that the Buddha said "I teach one thing" and then he says two things: "suffering and the end of suffering." Actually, he doesn't say, "I teach one thing," he just says, "All I teach is suffering and the end of suffering," but they are connected truths. The way he describes suffering helps you to understand suffering so that you can put an end to it. As Luang Puu Dune once said, the Dhamma is one thing clear through, unlike other things in the world that come in pairs and dualities, where this leads in one direction and that leads in another one. When you hold on to the Dhamma, it'll take you all the way to the end. You don't have to change planes in the meantime.

So hold on to the path. It's the one way of holding on that'll eventually lead you to freedom.