

The Duty to Understand

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In the first noble truth, the Buddha defines suffering or stress—the Pali word is *dukkha*—as the five clinging-aggregates, and the clinging is the important part of the compound there. The suffering that eats into the heart is made up of those five types of clinging: clinging to form, clinging to feelings, clinging to the perceptions or mental labels, clinging to thought constructs, and clinging to acts of consciousness or cognizance.

The clinging is something we have to comprehend. It's important to keep in mind the duties that go with each of those noble truths, because all too often we get our duties mixed up. We try to let go of the suffering, but the Buddha says, No, you should try to comprehend the suffering—which means we should try to comprehend the way there is clinging all around these aggregates.

To comprehend them, instead of just letting them go, we first have to learn how to cling in skillful ways. That's what the path is. You take those aggregates and you hold on to them in a different way. Instead of clinging to them for the sake of sensual desire, clinging to them in terms of habits, clinging to them in terms of unskillful views in and of themselves, or clinging to them as self, you learn how to hold on to them as a path. In holding on to them as a path, you're in a much better position to comprehend them—to comprehend both the aggregates and the clinging.

And it works two ways. One is to look at the aggregates and to see how they really aren't worth clinging to. And then look at the clinging itself, to see how it's unskillful.

This is where the teachings on skillful and unskillful behavior come in. As the Buddha suggested, there is a skillful way of holding on to these things. For instance, as we're meditating here right now, we're holding on to the body as our object, the form of the body here. We're also trying to breathe in ways that give rise to pleasant feelings.

We're holding on to the perception or the mental label of breath. We're holding on to the thought constructs: the directed thoughts that focus your attention on the breath, and the evaluation that looks at it to see where it might be improved, or where it's already pleasant, and what can be done with that sense of pleasure. We can spread it around. And we try to maintain our awareness of these things.

So we're still holding on, but we're holding on in a different way. When you hold on to the aggregates in this way, you can look at them in and of themselves, and you can see the clinging more clearly. The reason you can look at them is because it's a lot quieter than holding on to these things as your self, say, or holding on for the sake of sensual desire.

This is one of the reasons the Buddha has that chant on the 32 parts the body. As you contemplate the 32 parts—actually in the Canon, it's 31 parts; the brain got added in the commentaries. Once you look at the way you cling to the body, especially when you cling to it as something desirable, you can see the suffering involved.

Some people object that this type of meditation teaches us a negative body image, when so many of us are already suffering from negative body image. But the Buddha's not saying that your particular body is uglier than anyone else's. The parts that are listed there are the things we all have in common, and they're all unclean for everyone. There's no competition for Ms. Liver 2006, or Miss Kidneys. We're all equal in this regard.

The purpose of this contemplation is to get us to stop and look at our own attachment, because even if we don't think we're pretty or good-looking enough, still we're awfully attached to the body, and a fair amount of that attachment is sensual. There's that passage where the Buddha says that you start out by being attracted to yourself, then you go on to being attracted other people. So you've got to learn to look at the body in such way that you can get out of that mode. Then you'll find it easy to get into the mode of simply using the body as a vehicle for the practice. It becomes your object of meditation, simply for the purpose of concentration.

They say that concentration isn't fully mastered until the state of non-return, which is also the point where the fetter of sensual desire is cut. So this contemplation is very useful. If you really want the mind to settle down, and you notice the things that obstruct you from settling down, you'll see that one of the major things that obstruct you is your concern about the body: "Is it going to get well fed? Are the pains going to develop into permanent problems?" There are all these worries about the body that can pull us out.

So the Buddha has you look at the body in a way that you're less likely to get pulled out of issues of the body in and of itself. In that way, that particular form of clinging gets weakened. You're still holding to the body as part of your practice of concentration. And we remember that holding to habits and practices is a type of clinging, too. But you're holding to them as a tool for the sake of awakening. All the forms of clinging can get transformed. You take on views, right views, because

they're useful in understanding this problem of suffering, to help you comprehend. As long as you need them, as long as you haven't fully comprehended suffering, hold on to right views. Don't think you can go beyond views by being an agnostic or being a skeptic or being accepting all views. Those things in themselves are views that you can cling to.

Often they get in the way of seeing how you're causing suffering. If you cling to the idea that every path is good, well, there are a lot of bad paths out there. As for the old idea that all paths lead to the top of mountain, they don't. I don't know any mountain in the world where all the paths lead to the top. Some of them lead you over a cliff. Some of them lead you back to the bottom.

The Buddha has you hold on to the right views because they're useful, they're tools. Look at the stress, try to comprehend it, so that you let go of the cause. Once you've fully developed that view—in other words, once you've fully comprehend the stress, fully let go of the cause—then you can let go of the right view, too. You don't have to hold on to it anymore. It's there to use whenever you need it again, to teach other people, to help other people, but in terms of holding on, you hold on only as you're using it as a tool.

The same with views about the self: That's another type of clinging. You develop self-esteem around the idea that you're the sort of person who always tries to do the skillful thing, who feels shame over the idea of doing something unskillful, who fears the consequences of doing things that are unskillful. That's a useful self. That's a useful way of developing self-esteem. It doesn't depend on your always having done the right thing. Instead, it means you're always willing to admit your mistakes, learn from them, and try the best you can not to repeat them. That kind of self is a really helpful self to have on the path. As Ven. Ananda points out in one of the discourses, even conceit, the idea of "I am," plays a useful role in the path. You hear that other people have gained awakening and you say, "Well, if they can do it, why can't I?"

So all these forms clinging can be transformed into the right way of holding to the path. And when you use them to hold to the path, you first let go of the really unskillful forms of clinging, and then finally, once those are taken care of, you can turn and look at these clingings you have in the path. That's when you let go totally.

And you can examine the nature of clinging by looking at how you hold onto the path in very subtle ways. You can totally let go of clinging because you've comprehended it, you've been able to watch it in action. And you can learn to see that even skillful things ultimately have to be let go.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that one of the most important things that led to his awakening was his unwillingness to rest content with skillful qualities. Here he's not even mentioning unskillful qualities. He isn't the sort of teacher who says, well, learn to accept your anger and to appreciate your anger or whatever, be nice to your anger. He says, try to understand it so that you can go beyond it. Develop skillful qualities. But once you've developed them, don't rest content. You may have a nice luminous state of mind, but don't be content with that. Ajaan Maha Boowa makes the point that the luminous mind is ignorance. If you simply accept it as your goal, well, there you are: You're stuck. You shouldn't rest content even with that.

But this doesn't mean that you drop things right away as you develop them. You work at developing. You hold on to them, you maintain them, so that they can do their duty as a path, and then you can watch them to see what subtle forms of clinging are like. Once you've comprehended those, *then* you can let go. Ultimately, you see that even that the path has to be let go because it's fabricated, you can't totally trust it in and of itself. You can take hold of it as a tool but there comes a point where you have to let your tool go. Your craving for the path turns into dispassion and with dispassion there's release from all kinds of clinging, skillful and unskillful.

So remember this point: Clinging is there to be understood and you're going to understand it by turning it into the way you hold on to the path. Do the work of the path and then watch it as it's working. That becomes the way you complete your duties in terms of all four noble truths.

As you're working here, remember that there are skills to be mastered, there are things to be held on to. Don't think that you're clever and say, "Well, I've done a little concentration. I know what's it like. I can let go of it." If it hasn't done its work, you've got to hold on to it. And even when it *has* done its work, you'll find that it's useful from time to time. Even the Buddha still practiced concentration after his awakening. He still followed all the practices of the path, both because they were a pleasant abiding and because they were useful in his teaching career.

So learning to hold on to the path is one important skills that we have to work on, both so that the path can do its work and so that ultimately we can understand clinging in an all-around way and let it go in an all-around way. Once the stress and suffering of that first noble truth is done with, then the inherent stress of the aggregates doesn't weigh on the mind anymore, because you're not dragging it in to burden the mind. In other words, the stress that remains: It doesn't matter. The stress that weighs down the heart: It's gone.