

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta #11 - Without Clinging

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 04/29/2014.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Discourse on the Fields for Establishing Mindfulness, after each practice exercise, the Buddha offers variations on four instructions for the further development of the practice. These four instructions are what Anālayo Bhikkhu calls the "refrain".

Tonight we've reached the last of these instructions related to the body practice of mindfulness of breathing. The Buddha said:

And one dwells independent, not clinging to anything in the world.¹

With this sentence, the Buddha points us towards the ultimate goal of the practice. Living independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

This idea of living independently brought to mind one of the Buddha's last teachings. He said to the Venerable Ānanda and some other bhikkhus

...you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge.²

And, in a teaching from the Sutta Nipāta, a teaching that probably preceded the one I just quoted, the Buddha tells us

Having nothing,
clinging to nothing:
that is the Island,
there is no other;
that is Nibbāna, I tell you,
the total ending of aging and death.³

So, in effect, these verses are telling us that when we are able to live completely free of clinging, then we will be independent, being our own refuge and taking the Dhamma as our refuge. This, of course, raises the questions "What do we cling to?" and "How do I come to stop clinging?"

There are actually two components of what is being called clinging. It can seem confusing at times because the words craving and clinging are often used interchangeably to describe the overall process.

The first component of the process is Taṇhā, to use the Pāli word. It is usually translated as "craving", though literally it means "thirst". Another word that conveys the deep-seated wanting is "hunger". And a little more abstractly, Joseph Goldstein describes it as a "fever of unsatisfied longing."⁴

So this wanting, this thirst or hunger, this longing for some thing, some object, arises in the mind-body. Sometimes we're able to just recognize that wanting and let it go, let it pass away.

Clinging, the second component, arises when we get totally entangled with that wanting. And when that happens there is a kind of impulse or energy that arises to get the object. Our attention, our energy, our focus gets stuck to the object like velcro.

The Buddha talks about three categories of objects or experiences that we crave and cling to:

- Pleasant sensory experiences.
- The sense of "becoming" or of "existing" in some way.
- The sense of "non-becoming" or of "not existing" in a certain way.

Craving for sensual pleasures is the easiest, perhaps, to see and understand, though not so easy to work with. There may be a sight of a human form, a man, a woman or some part of a body. As we catch a sight, it is like we're seized by it. We just have to see it again. And again. And again. We have to keep sneaking peeks. Or even just look straight on. Even if we know it is not very appropriate. It is just so hard to resist. That's an example of craving/clinging for a sensory experience. And the same kind of thing can happen at any of the sensory doors, with any sense object, and with varying degrees of intensity.

When there's the simple impulse to continue existing, to continue being, or when we want to be a certain way, when we want our lives to go a certain way, then this is craving for becoming. There can be craving for things to be different from how they are right now, or craving for them to not change how it is now if it feels wonderful.

One way craving for becoming is expressed is through planning thoughts. When we're caught up in imagining our selves in the future, then we're caught in craving for becoming. An example of this is Walter Mitty, from the James Thurber story that was recently remade into a movie with Ben Stiller. Mitty is often described as a pathetic kind of man, but I prefer to think of him as a rather ordinary man leading an ordinary life. But he is always daydreaming himself leading some kind of heroic life, instead of finding the heroism in the life he was leading. Of course we don't have to be Walter Mittys to be caught in craving for becoming, it's as simple as craving a new car, a new cell phone, a different job, a vacation, perhaps to Florida or New York City, whatever we imagine will make "me" happier than I am now.

There is a difference between craving for becoming and setting a goal for oneself and working towards it. But for many of us, having a goal and craving it, being obsessive about it, often seem to get mashed together.

Another way that craving for becoming can be expressed, is our tendency to slightly lean into our momentary experience. Feeling the unpleasantness of this moment, we may be waiting with impatience, perhaps a little, perhaps a lot, for the next moment to come, anticipating the pleasure, the relief, that will come with that next moment. How often does this occur in our daily lives, when we're in a hurry and sitting at a red light waiting for it to change? Or when we're sitting in meditation, and an unpleasant sensation arises in the back or the legs or shoulders?

The distinction between craving for becoming and for non-becoming can get kind of murky in a situation like that. When we are not wanting to be in a situation we're in, and the emphasis is a little more on where we want to be, then that would be craving for becoming. And when there is more emphasis on where we don't want to be, then that would be craving for non-becoming.

Certainly the most extreme form of craving for non-becoming is having suicidal thoughts and impulses. But craving for non-becoming arises for each of us everyday, in just that strong reaction of "I don't want to be here right now!"

One of the difficulties with craving for becoming and non-becoming is that it takes us out of our lives as they are right now. It removes us from the reality of our lives. And when we've stepped back from reality it is hard to respond in a skillful way.

But another result of craving becoming or non-becoming is that it is all about "I". These thoughts and wishes and fantasies all reinforce the idea that there is a separate and autonomous "I" here, a self here, that exists independently in the world, which is a form of delusion, of not seeing clearly. This is a core expression of another kind of craving or clinging, clinging to views. In this case, clinging to the view of a self, of a me, independent from the ongoing flux of life.

So we're dealing with a paradox here. The Buddha is telling us to be like an island, to be independent, to be our own refuge. Yet part of being independent in that way, is seeing clearly for ourselves that there is no independent self, no independent "I or me." It is from seeing that clearly and deeply, that we gain the ability to truly be independent.

So, briefly now, we have these different ways of craving and clinging. And in the Second Noble Truth the Buddha tells us that craving is the cause for the origin of unsatisfactoriness, stress and suffering. So if we want to be free of agitation and suffering, then it is important to find a way to free ourselves from "clinging to anything in the world."

How do we stop clinging? In the quote where the Buddha is telling us to be an island unto ourselves, to be our own refuge, he goes on to say:

And how does one live as an island unto oneself, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge? Here, Ānanda, one abides contemplating the body as body, earnestly, clearly aware, mindful and having put away all hankering and fretting for the world, and likewise with regard to feelings, mind and mind-objects.⁵

So we can begin this process of non-clinging, by contemplating the world of experience, moment after moment, with mindfulness and a clear understanding of what is wholesome and what is not, of what leads to peace and harmony, and what leads to stress, struggle and

suffering. Each moment we see things clearly with mindfulness, and don't cling, then we're experiencing a moment of peace, a moment of non-delusion and we've begun to live a little more independently and without clinging.

Notes

1. adapted from Bhikkhu Bodhi. MN 10, "The Four Establishments of Mindfulness," In the Buddha's Words, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 282. (Used gender neutral "one" in place of "he.")
2. DN 16.2.26 {PTS II 100} "Mahāparinibbāna Sutta", adapted from: Maurice Walshe, trans. The Long Discourses of the Buddha, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995 p. 245 [Replaced "monks" and masculine pronouns with gender neutral "one".]
3. Sn 1094, Thānissaro Bhikkhu, trans., <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.5.10.than.html>, found in the above slightly adapted form in Ajahns Passano & Amaro, The Island, Redwood Valley, CA: Abhayagiri Monastic Foundation, 2009, p.v.
4. Goldstein, Joseph. Mindfulness, Boulder, CO: Sounds True Publications, Inc., 2013, p. 299.
5. DN 16.2.26 {PTS II 100} - see note 2, above.