

THE INTANGIBLES: CLINGING

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One of the "intangible" concepts that we need to grasp is that of attachment or clinging. Touching my hand to a hot stove gets a reaction out of me, for sure, but that is not the kind of reaction I am looking at here. Instead, it is our instantaneous mental reactions to things, people, and events that are being discussed, the fact that we form attachments (judgments positive or negative) to objects we perceive as outside ourselves and then cling to them.

We instinctively want to pull those things we like closer to us and push those things we don't like away. The rest we ignore. This is what is meant by attachment or "clinging," when we like or dislike something. Buddhist mind training seeks to reduce and remove clinging and its biases so that we can see more clearly.

Our distracted mind is a seething mass of constant identification, of which we are aware only by our reactions. We are endlessly turned on or off by whatever catches our attention. We like this; we don't like that, or ignore it completely. Our hopes and fears color everything. This is called clinging or attachment.

It is the clinging itself that obscures our internal vision. By always pushing our biases this way or that, we gradually build up obscurations that dim out the light of the mind. Like mental cataracts, clinging-attachments increasingly blind us from recognizing the actual nature of the mind itself. We become myopic.

A common fear and misconception is that when we remove our attachments, we will somehow lose our love or joy of life, the idea that Buddhists are non-biased, neither for nor against this or that (non-attached), and therefore somehow neutral to life itself – a vanilla or gray take on life.

In other words, if we cease identifying things and events as positive or negative through our attachment to them, does this remove them from our life. How could it? Only our clinging to them is gone. They are all still there and we can enjoy them as we will.

If I 'really' love chocolate ice cream and somehow manage to reduce my life-long attachment to it, does that mean I can no longer love chocolate ice cream? In other words, by gradually removing my attachments, does that take the fun out of life?

The answer is no. I still love chocolate ice cream, but my attachment or clinging to it has been reduced. I don't have to have it. If it is there I can enjoy it, even love it, but if it is not available I am OK with that too. Perhaps I will have some vanilla. By weakening our attachments we learn to enjoy what IS rather than what we think should or could be.

In fact we can enjoy both pleasant and unpleasant experiences without clinging to them, without attachment. Attachment simply refers to the energy and focus spent clinging to what we like and shunning what we don't like. Attachment differs from simple awareness of how things are by attempting to put a spin or bias on things. Our attachment (clinging) has nothing to do with the objects themselves, i.e. what we are attached to, whether positively or negatively.

Remove or lessen our attachment and the objects of our attachment remain for us to enjoy or experience without the clinging. In other words, we can enjoy what life brings us at the good times, but not suffer by clinging to these things when they are not present. We can bask in and enjoy the warmth of a sunny day, but also accept a gray or even a rainy day (now and again) without wincing. Things are just what they are. We don't have to embroider or embellish them with our biases. My first dharma teacher would often say:

"My god is no beggar and does not need me to make the ends meet. The ends already meet."

In other words, our clinging is a huge energy suck, not to mention that it obscures our vision of the way things naturally are. If you want to see "clinging" at work, just watch the talking heads on TV (representing various factions) busy putting spin on things. That is how attachments work.

And the same holds true for our self. The sum total of our attachments (for and against) is what we call "clinging to the Self." Our clinging-attachment is the glue that holds our personal self together. We cling to our own self-image as if it were real, even though we made it up ourselves. Gradually remove that attachment and the self becomes increasingly transparent, and is seen as the simple tool that it is, our personal assistant. It is no longer an obscuration because we begin to see through it.

When we start to detach and not-cling to our attachments, we give up our attachment to the object, but not the object itself. We can enjoy what life offers without having to cling to it, and experience difficult or unpleasant situations without denying them existence. In fact removal of clinging results in a sense of vivid seeing of everything. Clinging is just like sticking our heads in the sand, wishful thinking. We are ignoring the reality.

As we gradually detach ourselves from our clinging through mind practices like tong-len, what we now call our self becomes increasingly transparent and is no longer an obstacle to our seeing clearly. We begin to see through the self as we gradually drop our attachments, one by one. The self is no longer a big problem. It becomes manageable.

Yes, it can be tricky. For example, giving up my attachment to overeating results in my eating less, so yes, I cease to overeat. In that sense, something changes or is lost, but nothing essential to my well-being. I am better off for it. I chose it.

The Tibetans love to say that the dharma removes what must be removed and adds what must be added. It is self-pruning. How wonderful is that.

As we begin to be more aware and identify our reactions (our biases), we shave off the excess or attachment and leave the objects just as they naturally are, without our clinging to them. And they are still there for us to enjoy.

Does our self disappear if we remove all our attachments to it? The answer is no. The self (or some semblance of it) is a necessary part of functioning as a person. It is the attachment (clinging) to the self that is removed, and the self remains as the sum total of how we personalize ourselves, our persona -- personality.

And we can see this very easily when tragedy strikes in our own life. It is not that the self disappears at the death of a loved one, for example, but rather that our appetite and attachment to things thins out or vanishes for a time. Our sense of self is shattered for a time. Everything else is still there. Most of us have experienced this phenomenon by now.

I notice this in a lesser way with just the stuff around the house. One of my kids or a visitor breaks a rare one-of-a-kind vase or whatever. I used to totally anguish over such an event, but I find that today I just accept it and shrug it off. Do I welcome such events? No, of course not. But am I all attached to these objects to some huge extent? No, not any longer. C'est la vie.

This has been a brief clarification (I hope) as to the difference between clinging attachment and the objects of that clinging. We remove the clinging, not the objects.

