

Satipaṭṭhāna (63) Second Noble Truth

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holding, clinging, craving, suffering, meditation, desire, knowing, mindfulness, grasping, grief, softening, intensity, interpretation, striker

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The practice of letting go is a powerful teacher. If you learn to let go, you can be more fully available for your life, and compassion and wisdom can arise. The practice of letting go can reveal all the ways in which we cling, grasp, and hold on.

In daily life, it is often hard to see our clinging. But in meditation, we can see the subtlety and the consistency of clinging – how easy it is for the mind to wander off into some concern. Some of our preoccupations might seem innocent enough, but they still mean some part of us is interested in our thoughts, fantasies, and the past and the future.

That interest involves some kind of desire or wish that can be mild and innocent, yet it can also be strong and intense. There might be anger while sitting in meditation, where the mind just can't drop thinking about what happened and what someone said because the intensity of holding on to and being concerned about it is so strong.

But one of the things we learn is the constancy of clinging – how subtly and thoroughly we are always holding on to something. In daily life, we don't see the minutia and the ongoingness of clinging so clearly. In some ways, we are being led around. We are being hijacked and directed by our desires, and there is a lack of freedom in this. We are not directing the show – our desires are.

In meditation, we can learn how clinging works and learn to let go of it. We can start to cultivate softening the muscle of holding on and clinging, softening the intensity and the energy behind it. Among the mental orientations that lead us to cling and hold on to things are the inclination to give authority to our thoughts, the inclination to see everything through the filter of me, myself, and mine, and the orientation to have opinions that we "need to have, we have to have." Meditation is a laboratory to discover what it is like to let go of it all. Let go, let go, let go.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, there has been no real discussion about letting go in mindfulness practice. At the very beginning, the sutta talks about relaxing the body. But that is the closest the text gets to actually instructing us to let go. The phenomenal power of *satipaṭṭhāna* is that we are not the agents of change. We are not the ones who are doing the change. We are the ones who are knowing – showing up for experience and knowing it well. Then the letting go happens in a deeper way.

It can be very wise to let go if you know how. (It can also be unwise. There can be unwise letting go – letting go of the wrong things.) In Buddhism, what we focus on is not the *things* we let go of. But rather, we focus on letting go of the clinging and holding on to things. In this regard, it is helpful to make the distinction between "holding on" and "holding." I can hold on to this striker (Gil's hand grasps the striker with his fingers and thumb enclosed around it). I can also hold the striker like this with my hand flat (the striker rests in the palm of Gil's open hand). When we hold something in the softness of our hands, we are holding it lightly. If it is something that needs to go or is naturally going away, then it goes because we are not holding on to it. If it is something that we temporarily need to use as a tool, then we can grasp it and do something, and then we can return to holding it lightly. So we do not necessarily have to lose things when letting go. We lose the grasping – the holding on – although we still might hold.

Why is this important when looking at the Four Noble Truths? Because probably the most popular and common modern interpretation of the Four Noble Truths is that the second noble truth teaches that craving is the cause of suffering – craving or grasping is somehow responsible for how we suffer. In this interpretation, if the grasping goes away, then the suffering goes away.

It is possible to argue this. For example, not all suffering comes from grasping and clinging. Some suffering (pain, sadness, grief) is a natural part of life. When a dear loved one dies, the fact that we feel grief and sadness does not have to entail any grasping or clinging. The feelings are a natural result of losing something important to us.

But in grief, there can also be clinging and attachment. The issue in practice is how to hold something like grief without holding on to it. When we hold it, then grief seems to know what to do. If we hold on to grief, we limit its unfolding.

So we could argue it is possible to question whether suffering comes from craving. That is why I like to turn this interpretation around and say that if you crave, you will suffer. This way, I am not saying that all suffering comes from craving, but rather, that craving is a cause for suffering. Part of the reason that I feel confident in saying this is that craving itself is a form of suffering – a stress on our system. Regardless of what we crave – the thing we crave – the act of craving is suffering.

The act of craving also creates habits in the mind – karmic momentum – that will come back and sometimes make things more difficult in the future. So, learning to recognize what is called “craving” or “clinging” is important. I like to think of it as being a compelling desire which we don’t seem to have much choice about because it is so compelling, so forceful, so insistent. If we put it down, it immediately comes back. Sometimes we try to let go of it, and we can’t. Sometimes the intensity of our addiction to desire has complete control over us.

Some people find the simple idea that craving gives rise to suffering phenomenally useful. If you let go of the craving, that particular suffering goes away. The suffering that is there not because of craving is a whole other topic. I think the focus on craving, clinging, and letting go is one of the great teachings of modern Buddhism. This teaching allows us to release a lot of the tension and stress – the *dukkha* (suffering) that we carry with us in our lives.

The first noble truth is the truth of suffering. The second noble truth is that craving is a cause of suffering. Some people in the modern world also like to say that, in this regard, suffering is optional. Pain is not. Emotional pain comes with life. In Buddhist language, suffering is the pain that arises because of clinging. So if there is pain that has no clinging, then it would not be called *dukkha*. We would not use the Buddhist word for suffering for it.

In learning to let go, there are two ways to drop something. There is letting go of the holding on to it. Another way some people love to practice letting go is not to let go per se, but rather, to let be. This is close to what we are doing in *satipaṭṭhāna*. *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice is a practice of letting everything be and then just seeing it for what it is: knowing it. If we think of the knowing of mindfulness as a letting be practice, this adds a richness and depth to mindfulness that I think is very significant.

Letting things be. Letting go of the holding on, wanting, expecting, measuring ourselves (how are we doing?), wanting it to be different, wanting something to go away. All these compulsive thoughts and ideas can weigh us down when we do mindfulness practice. In mindfulness, the idea is to come to a very free, easy, satisfying place where we let everything just be. In the beingness, we know it. We let it be, and we know what we are allowing to be. Whether it is the experience of the body, feeling tones, mind states, the hindrances, or the Seven Factors of Awakening, a lot of the practice is just letting it be and knowing it well.

What we discover over time is that the act of clear, full, knowing while we let things be has an impact. It sets in motion something that begins to unfold, move, and change. I do not know if this is a good analogy, but if you take a bottle of carbonated water, shake it, and remove the lid, just removing and letting go of the lid that holds on to the top of the bottle releases the pressure of the carbonation, the gas.

Sometimes letting go by itself releases and frees something. Sometimes it allows something healthy to flow and move. Our psychophysical being are processes – they are not things. Holding on interferes with the dynamic nature of this life that we are. Letting be does not let things stay the same. Letting things be allows a dynamic process to unfold which is not under our direction. So there is a letting go of direction. Controlling the direction is another thing to hold on to.

Today you might want to look at any behaviors you have that are compulsive: whatever thoughts, words you speak, and activities you do that you find yourself doing without deliberation, care, and attention. Wherever something inside of you has taken the ball and run with it: where you are not free. Look at what you need to let go of or not hold on to in order to come back to a place of freedom, choice, and agency, where you know what

you are doing without compulsion getting in the way. Stop throughout the day and take a good look at this, and you will learn a lot.

Tomorrow, I will offer a different interpretation of the second noble truth as it relates to the third noble truth. Thank you.