

Dharmette: Non-Clinging

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 14, 2010

In mindfulness practice, Buddhist practice, there's one quality, one approach – a single one – that is at the heart of it all, or the sweetener of it all, or the protector of it all, or the essence of it all, the guide for it all. It's such an important part of this practice, and that's the quality of non-clinging – to always remember not clinging to things. So in being mindful – whatever is going on – independent of what has to happen or not happen, can I find the place of not clinging to what's happening, or not clinging to my ideas of what's supposed to happen or not happen?

Clinging, I propose, is always extra. Clinging is not required in any situation at all. There are many things in our world that we have to take care of, and it's possible to take care of them responsibly without clinging. There are many things that we have to think about, and it's possible to think about them without clinging. It's possible to live a very responsible life without clinging.

I don't think it's very often that clinging helps. Sometimes it helps if you're at the edge of Half Dome, looking over the edge and there's a railing – you might want to cling to the edge of the railing. That might help in a strong wind. But in terms of the inner life, clinging messes things up. Clinging is extra. It's a lot of extra effort, a lot of energy. To learn to develop confidence in the mind's, the heart's, capacity to live a responsible life without clinging is one of the great confidences to discover in this practice.

So, the practice is to say, "Where am I clinging here?" – and to see it as being extra; to look at the arguments that you have in your mind. But why do you feel it necessary to cling? Some people defend their clinging: it's very important. Some people feel that they would rather not cling. They don't feel that it needs to be defended, but sometimes they don't see their clinging, and don't know how to let go of their clinging. That's probably why we practice. It's because it's not so easy to let go of it.

But to remember that non-clinging is a reference point. In practice, where's the non-clinging in this situation? It might be that the non-clinging is to be found not in letting go of what you're holding onto. So say that I'm meditating, and I'm holding onto an idea that I'm supposed to be concentrated. Everyone else sitting here is completely concentrated; I'm the only one who is not concentrated. I'm supposed to be concentrated, and I'm clinging to that. And then maybe the non-clinging can be found in being relaxed about having that tendency for that clinging – not to be upset with yourself for clinging about not having a concentrated mind.

So rather than asking the question, "How can I not cling to what I'm clinging to?" it might be a good place to begin by asking, "Where's the non-clinging in this experience that I'm having?"

Because it's not 100% clinging; it's not the only thing you're doing. Can you take this situation and hold it with more graciousness, more spaciousness? Can you relate to it, and find out what would it look like if I didn't tighten up around it; if I didn't contract around it; if I didn't resist it so much? – all versions of clinging.

For example, one of the very important things for Buddhist practitioners to not cling to is Buddhism. And there's plenty of clinging towards Buddhism: Buddhist ideas; I'm supposed to be a certain way; I'm supposed to attain these things; I want to; I have to cling to beliefs. Some people cling to identities around being a Buddhist. Buddhism is meant to be the antidote to clinging, not the reason to cling more. So how do we hold Buddhism so that we don't cling to Buddhism or to ourselves as a Buddhist practitioner?

How do we experience whatever we're experiencing and not cling to an identity around it? How

do we not cling to the ideas we have about what's happening? How do we not cling to our preferences? And part of this requires us to really understand, the best we can, when we're clinging. And that's not always so easy because some people confuse discomfort with clinging. Some people think whenever they're uncomfortable, this must mean that they're clinging to something. Or some people think the opposite, "I'm not clinging; I'm just uncomfortable."

But to be able to get very familiar with that movement of the mind with compulsion. Clinging has a quality of compulsion, of being driven. When you cling, or you have compulsion or drivenness, you can't let go of something very easily. It stays stuck in the churning, the thinking, the activity of the mind.

One of the opposites to clinging is the absence of conflict – to experience something and not be in conflict with it. And that also doesn't mean we don't change it. But conflict means that in the inner life, our awareness doesn't contract around conflict; the heart is not contracted or in conflict with what's going on.

Our wisdom might say, "I need to say 'No' to this," but the awareness, the heart, doesn't close down to what's going on. And so, one of the arts of practice, which takes a while to learn, is how to stay relaxed, how to stay non-clinging, without some inner sense of being in conflict with what's going on – and at the same time, do the real world things that need to be done, and say, "No not that. I can't do that," or "This is what has to happen." It's not one or the other, or you just become a pushover, "I'm not going to cling to anything; I'll just sit here, and be Mr. Natural, and everything is fine."

In a sense, everything is fine for the heart. But for our evaluation, our consideration, our empathy for the world, there are things that are not okay. And so how to engage in responsibly taking care of things without clinging, without contracting, without the awareness being in conflict with it? This is where, for me, the idea that it's meaningful that everything that occurs, occurs within the field, within the bubble of awareness. Our awareness is like an optical illusion. None of our experiences happen outside of our experiencing it, right? We experience something because we see it; we smell it; we taste it; we touch it; we hear it; and the mind cognizes it. And so everything is mediated through our sense experiences.

The gestalt of all that, which we often call 'awareness,' is the awareness of what's going on. Our awareness right now extends to the boundaries of this room – our direct, immediate awareness. So are you in this room, or is the room in you? Are all these good people here – are they outside of you or inside of you? Of course, they're outside of you physically, but they're inside this wonderful bubble of awareness. And so one of the aspects of non-clinging, or one of the ways to get a taste of it, is to realize that awareness doesn't have to be in conflict with anything. It can hold everything within it. It's very accepting or embracing. It's inclusive, and allows everything to be within it.

When there's clinging, then we tend to make divisions, and there's that which we cling to and that which we don't cling to. There's a kind of narrowing of the world. So in Zen they talk about the big mind – the big mind within which everything occurs. In that field of perceptual awareness – which in a way is an optical illusion – everything happens within. To stay close to that and feel it is one way of getting a sense of this world of non-clinging. And within that field of intimacy, of connectedness, we then step forward and take care of what needs to happen.

So here at IMC, on Wednesdays at twelve o'clock, one of the things we take care of is we clean. We don't accept; we don't just allow dust to build up, the windows to get dirty, and the trash to overflow – we take care of these things. But hopefully we take care of these things without clinging to any of it. Hopefully, we can both take care of things and be relaxed. We can care about things and not care at the same time. That's what we'll try to do.