Upādāna: Clinging

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 15:46

We're tackling this word upādāna. It's translated as clinging, sometimes grasping. It's important because it's the eighth link in dependent origination.

Its literal meaning, according to the Pali dictionary, is that material substratum by means of which an active process is kept alive and going—fuel, supply, provision. In other words, its role in the psyche is the same as something like petrol or electricity in a car. It sustains the process.

There are four of these clingings. The Dharma is very good at lists. The first one won't surprise you: clinging to sensual pleasure. Then clinging to rites and rituals as if they were liberating, clinging to views and opinions, and finally, of course, clinging to the view of self.

If we look at the first one, most of you will know this—it's the desire for sensual pleasure. But remember that there are six senses in the Buddhist teaching, and the sixth is the mind itself. So it means all our emotions, all our thoughts, which are usually dependent on some physical base. The problem is that when we're driven by this sort of desire, it's never fulfilling. As soon as we are fulfilled, we rest for a little while and then we want some more. It leads us to manipulating the world we're living in, to make it fit our ends. We're constantly having this little strife or struggle—sometimes quite minor, little irritations and things like that, and sometimes pretty major. But anything that arises out of that desire to seek happiness in the six sensual pleasures is obviously going to lead to some level of unsatisfactoriness.

So how do we tackle that? Well, we know it's through vipassanā—to see it clearly, to see that process clearly is the first understanding. And then there's the practice of not indulging it. We can make a distinction here: when we eat toast, it makes us happy. But if we eat toast *in order* to make us happy, there's going to be a problem. That's the one we don't want.

The other thing the Buddha uses is restraint. He's big on restraint. Whenever we feel that compulsive nature over something—doesn't matter what it is, toast, a cup of tea—just hold back and let go of it. Wait for that urgent energy to give way. And if possible, do without. It's like when you walk on the street and come across a cafe and the coffee sort of hooks your nose and reels you in. It's resisting that and just walking steadfastly past that cafe—at least until the next one.

But it's also restraining everything which is becoming obsessional. And don't forget fasting. Fasting isn't only not eating when that's become obsessional. It's all the social media, the news, the videos, the shopping. Anything that becomes compulsive, we stop for a while just to let go of it. When we come on retreat, the first three days are always difficult. One of the things that makes those first three days really

difficult is the change of habits—getting up at a different hour, not eating at the same time. All these things are irritating. We don't like to change our habits.

So that's the first clinging: clinging to sensual pleasure.

The next one is clinging to rites and rituals as a religious practice. Now, some of it is very supportive—for instance, bowing. Bowing can be an expression of surrender, of gratitude, of a sense of offering, like you're offering your day for the benefit of others. And it can be a sense of awe, when you bring the profundity of the Buddha's teachings to mind and say, "How did he do it?"

Lighting a candle—that can remind us of the three paths within the Eightfold Path. The light is the path of insight, the warmth is the path of love, and the action of the flame is the path of wholesome works, good works. And it's important to recite the refuges and precepts every morning, because that just reminds you what your life is about, ultimately.

Chanting, counting beads—all of it serves to keep the mind steady, to prevent it from wandering all over the place. And of course, taking refuges and precepts as a public declaration, committing yourself to the path, has a real strengthening effect. It doesn't mean you might not become a Muslim later on. It's just that at this present moment, you're devoted to this particular teaching.

So all these practices—it's like sealing a particular relationship with the public rite of marriage. There's the christening or naming ceremony, and there's burials. These are all rituals, very meaningful, but in themselves, unfortunately, they don't lead to liberation. Never mind.

Number three—well, this is a big one: clinging to views and opinions. Our whole politics has now become polarizing precisely because of people clinging to their views and opinions. What happens is that you forget about the issue and start to attack the person. These arguments are called *ad hominem*, *argumentum ad hominem*—a bit of Latin there—which means the speaker attacks the character, the motive, some other attribute of the person making the argument. Forget the issue. As long as they can humiliate the other, they've won the argument.

Interestingly enough, the Buddha, in very early strata of the discourses, tells his monks and nuns not to get involved in these open debates. You just come away either with a big ego or you come away humiliated.

Just my own reflection: right up until Thatcher came in, politics tended to still be gentlemanly—still patriarchal, so gentlemanly. But then the names came out. They started calling conservatives who didn't follow her way "the wets," if you remember. People who were unemployed became "scroungers." The whole thing began to get quite ugly, really. There was Cameron making fun of Farage, mocking his name, his poncy foreign-sounding pronunciation. And recently Starmer was made fun of because of his teeth. Of course, Trump is a master of it. Once he said "Sleepy Joe," really that was the end of it, I think.

So it's drawing politics down to this real ugly level of just trying to destroy the person. And of course it's happening everywhere—I've mentioned things from the UK, but everywhere you go, this is what's happening.

The antidote, of course, is a little bit of humility. It's realizing that whatever view I have, I can't grasp the whole situation, the whole matrix that the problem sits within, and that I need other people's perspectives. The wider my perspective becomes, the more I can say, "Well, I'm getting close to understanding the situation."

Sometimes people think this teaching tells you not to have a view. But remember, the Buddha had a view. He had right view. So we can have views. It's just the way we relate to them in terms of identity: "I am right. Everybody else is wrong. I'm a lefty. I'm a right-winger"—and so on and so forth. There's no need for it if we simply look at the issues and ask, "What can we do here?" It's as simple as that: what can be done? So this polarization is a big problem, and it all comes from this clinging to "my view."

The final one, of course, is clinging to the view of self, and this is the root clinging. From this clinging, all clinging clings.

The problem with the self is that it only sees the sensual world, and it only sees the sensual world as a place where it can make itself happy. You can't blame it. You can't blame yourself for wanting to be happy in the sensual world. What happens is that it obviously collects a lot of stuff—feels safer for it, more money in the bank, and so on. But then that acquisitiveness has to be guarded. You're always on the lookout for danger—governments, people like that—who might take all your money away. And if they're bigger than you, like governments, you tend to run, tend to hide.

So you've got this basic triangle, this three-pronged movement into daily life: assertiveness, aversion, and fear. From that, all the problems arise.

How do we undermine that? Well, obviously, again, it's vipassanā. And I want to point you to this place we get to sometimes when everything is calm. The mind is still, everything's calm, and you become very much aware of being the—I've got all these words—the observer, the feeler, the experiencer, the knower, the witness. It doesn't matter what you call it. But it's beginning to understand that whatever is perceiving cannot be what is perceived. When I look at the shed in my garden here, I can't be the shed.

So when I go inwards and I perceive a pain, I can't be it. It's an object of my perceiving. Making this more and more clear to ourselves begins to undermine that sense of self.

We can also undermine it by practicing virtues. Anything that weakens that sense of ego, that sense of selfishness—generosity, love, compassion, sympathetic joy. All these, when we're practicing virtues, must be undermining the sense of self. It's as simple as that.

And finally, there's this core insight that the Buddha gives us about the self. He saw clearly that identity

comes after wanting. It's language that fools us. I say, "I want a coffee." So the "I" comes first, then the "want," then the "coffee." But psychologically, it's coffee, want, I.

This allows us to distance from the wanting. We can actually see the wanting as an object, some feeling within us. And it gives us just one moment of choice—the only moment we have of choice. Now, this isn't some airy-fairy free will. This choice is conditioned. It's conditioned by wisdom or lack of it.

And what we want to know is: how does wisdom grow? Well, it's the very suffering being caused that makes us seek the end of suffering, which guides us towards wisdom. That's how it works. This is a truly amazing insight that the Buddha had into our psychology.

So there we have it—these four clingings. Clinging to sensual pleasure. Clinging to rites and rituals as if they were enough to make us liberated. Clinging to views and opinions, the conceit of "I am," "I am right." And finally, this clinging to the sense of self. That one, of course, is the most difficult and the final clinging to be unclung.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, and that by your unclinging, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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