

How to Develop a Mind That Clings to Nothing

It's said that one of the great patriarchs of the Zen tradition, Hui Neng, was enlightened upon hearing a single verse of the Diamond Sutra (one of the key teachings in Buddhism).

That verse can be translated in various ways, but the key line in it goes something like, "Develop a mind that clings to nothing."

Imagine having a mind like that — it doesn't get attached, it doesn't need things to be a certain way, it doesn't need people to behave in particular ways. It's a mind at home everywhere, because it doesn't need to be anywhere in particular.

All of our difficulties would be eased:

- If someone irritates you, it's because you are attached to a particular way you want them to behave, and when you don't get that way, you are unhappy. If your mind didn't cling to what you wanted, you would be fine with how they were acting. In fact, you might have compassion for them, as you could see they are suffering.
- If you are stuck in traffic, or a long line somewhere, you can become bothered when you want your life to be different (to not have traffic or a long line). Your mind is clinging to how it wants things, and doesn't like not getting its way.
- When someone is upset with you, you can become defensive or angry that they're acting that way, because you're clinging to wishing they would treat you a certain way. If you let go of clinging, it wouldn't excuse their bad behavior — nor would you have to allow yourself to be abused. But you would not have to be upset, you would just protect yourself by not allowing yourself to be abused (if necessary). And again, you might have understanding for their suffering.

Every difficulty is caused by this clinging: stress when you're overwhelmed, procrastination when you don't want to work on something difficult or do uncomfortable exercise, loneliness, shutting your heart down in an argument, overeating, bad financial habits, and much more.

Let's look at how we'd react in one situation, if we could have a mind of no clinging. Then let's look at how we might start to develop that no-clinging mind.

Example: Dealing with a Difficult Situation with No-Clinging Mind

Let's say you have a loved one who is addicted to drugs, and you really want to help them. But you're stressed about how to help them, about them going down this path, and about whether you're even able to help.

The stress is caused by clinging — how you want them to behave, wanting things to turn out the way you want them to turn out. You have a loving intention, but at the same time your clinging is causing you some suffering.

Their drug addiction is also caused by clinging. They ran to drugs to get away from their difficulties, which were caused by clinging. They enjoyed the high and found it to be a comfort from their difficulties, and clung to that feeling. Over time, that clinging hardened to addiction, and their clinging causes them to stay addicted. They are suffering, and we can see that and have a genuine wish for it to end (without clinging to needing that outcome to happen).

So seeing all of this, you start to let go. You don't need them to be a certain way, you just love them. You just show up for them, with acceptance and compassion. You open your heart to them, without needing things to change.

And you offer help, of course. You share ideas for seeking counseling, for meditation, for drug addiction strategies and treatment centers. But you are not attached to them actually doing those things — they are offered lovingly, as a gift.

This is one way a non-clinging mind might deal with a difficult situation. There are many others, but you can see that this non-clinging can be tremendously helpful in any situation.

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I'm not going to pretend that I never cling, nor that it's easy to develop a mind that clings to nothing. This is something I'm still working on, and I'm not attached to having it develop overnight (or ever getting there, really).

To the extent that we practice, it is helpful.

So here's how I would practice:

- Start by just noticing when you are clinging. It's hard to see at first, but once you start to see, you can notice it all the time. When you don't like the way your food tastes, that's clinging. When you *need* to have your coffee, that's clinging. When you overeat, procrastinate, get frustrated, lash out, run to your favorite distractions, shut someone out ... those are ways of clinging. Just start noticing, without judgment.
- Notice how it feels when you're clinging. What do you notice about your mind? What do you notice about the sensations in your body? Get curious, and start to fine-tune your attention so that you can notice the smallest details.
- Practice daily meditation, in the morning, for 5-10 minutes for at least a month. Extend it to 10-15 minutes after a month. Notice when you are putting off meditation (clinging to wanting to check your phone), or when you are wanting to get up from your seat

before meditation is over, or when you are clinging to anything during the meditation.

- Practice letting go. It's a kind of relaxing of the tightening of your mind and body. It's a relaxing of your grasp on how you want things to be. It's easier when you don't care that much, so practice in easier situations at first. It's saying to yourself, "I don't need things to be my way. I don't need them to be any way. I'm content either way, because no matter what happens, the universe is freaking amazing."
- Notice the self-centeredness of clinging. When you are clinging to something, it's because you are at the center of your universe. You want things to go your way, to meet your desires (or avoid your aversions), to be the way you like it. This is when we put ourselves at the center of everything. This is not judgmental, but just a noticing of perspective.
- Expand your perspective beyond your self-focused view, to get out of the clinging. See the other person's perspective, understand that they are suffering, understand that in their suffering and clinging, you are alike, you are connected. See that you and all others are interconnected, affecting each other, supporting each other, and to the extent that you can wish for an end to others' suffering, it benefits you as well. Expand your heart to wish for an end to the clinging and suffering of others, and not worry so much about your own desires and self-protection. This is a helpful thing when it comes to clinging, because when we expand, we no longer need things to be *our* way.
- See the beauty in everything, the immense, profound awesomeness in every little thing. When we cling to things being one way, we ignore the amazingness of the things around us, because if we saw that amazingness, we wouldn't need things to be *one* way. All ways are incredible, in their own way. Appreciating that is helpful.

This won't get you all the way, but it gets you a lot closer.

The real way to develop a mind that clings to nothing is to first, continue to let go. Moment after moment, notice the clinging and then let go. Over and over again.

And then to expand yourself beyond your narrow perspective, to see the interconnectedness of all things, to appreciate the beauty in all around us, to not see yourself as separate from everything else but a part of it all, in it together, and fall deeply in love with that fact.