

【Buddhist Encounters: Finding a Home in the Human Condition】

Detachment and Connection Across Boundaries

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1. On Close Relationships

When we hear the English word “attachment,” it is often a positive reaction. Some might go further to say “loving attachment” to spouse, children, family, and friends. By contrast “un-” or “de-” prefixes are seen as removal from interaction and imply indifference toward others. From the Buddhist perspective, attachment is seen as a construct of our thoughts and intentions. They are using the word in its meaning of “an addition to,” as when we have an attachment for our computer. Attachments are the “add-ons” we make to our concepts of self and others. I recently watched the fascinating documentary “My Octopus Teacher.” In the video, we get to see the octopus hiding herself from sharks by using her tentacles with their suction cups to pick up bits of pottery, metal, and glass, using the objects to wrap around her body so she is not recognized. For all the world, she looks like a pile of broken bits of glass and ceramics. This comes very close to the meaning of attachment used in Buddhist material. We add on external features that are constructed items not a part of us, used to present ourselves to others. If we want others to see us as smart, controlled, leaders, we attach attempts to display these features. When we hear of “detaching,” it means to put down the attachments and just be a pure view of who we are. It is by no means indifference, it is letting go of those aspects that obscure and misguide those around us.

The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra tells us that there are householder bodhisattvas who have wealth and enjoy what it gives them. However, these

bodhisattvas recognize wealth or prestige for what they are... mere attachments not very different from the Octopus's shells that are used to survive a time and place. The bodhisattva recognizing the nature of the attachments does not cling to them and has the ability at the right moment to put them aside and live the fullness of life. There are emotional and mental attachments that are much more subtle than those we use to create a safe and secure life. I have had an experience of being forced to recognize some of my attachments and to understand how I have tried, in my life, to use them.

I recently faced the anguish of my wife's death. We made a promise to each other that as we faced old age and illness, we would always try to be honest with one another and not try to shield the other from knowledge of reality. After the doctor told me that she had perhaps a year or less to live, I asked him to be open with us both about her condition. He was willing to share his honest opinion about the progress of her cancer.

During the ensuing months, we returned again and again to our sixty-two years together. We said things that we had been fearful of ever voicing, we began to drop our attachments that had often driven wedges into our intimacy. Instead of discovering things that would cause us to turn away from one another, we most often found how much we had given to each other. We recognized that neither of us would be what we were without our long life together. To my amazement, I discovered that she truly loved me without any of my attachments of success and status. She was content just to be with me, present with one another, no attachments needed or wanted.

During those difficult months, we had the opportunity to discuss our lives and without shame or blame to share fears, hopes, and joys. At one point, we came to a recognition that we had said to each other all that we wanted to say about our love for one another, our struggles and problems in the past, and our thanks to each other for what we had been given and received. During those moments, I began to see that my attachments that I thought made me worthy of her love... being a professor, publishing books, having recognition of my accomplishments... were just things that I had acquired to hide my perceived defects. My wife was an artist and had her own attachments to recognition, acclaim, public displays in museums around the world. It may be sad to say that we had to wait sixty-two years to



Filled with faith, Vakkali sat beside the Buddha, seeking nothing more.

disciple just sat and looked at the Buddha, others around them began to notice this and finally they approached the Buddha and said, “You must make him leave you, go out, study, meditate, and use effort to achieve enlightenment.” In other words, it must have been difficult to comprehend what value there was in just sitting and being in the presence of someone. So, the Buddha asked him to leave and try to find his place in the world.

It was not long before the Buddha began to receive word that Vakkali was despondent and some thought suicidal. In compassion, the Buddha allowed him to return. But to the displeasure of the group, Vakkali went back to his old ways and just sat in the presence of the Buddha with no other wish or intention. When the group began to once again criticize him for this behavior, the Buddha stopped them and said “Leave him alone, he is the foremost among you with trust (sometimes translated faith). This is his way of practice.” Having the experience of finding

understand that our love for another was not dependent on our attachments. In her last days when she could no longer converse, we both realized that it was enough just to have the presence of the other and that the attachments we had so carefully picked up and arranged around ourselves were a hindrance to this moment of finding it sufficient to hold hands and share a smile.

There is a story of a disciple of the Buddha who just wanted to sit near the Buddha; he seemed to have no other ambitions. There are many variations on this story of Vakkali. I will retell it as I think it might have occurred. My experience with my wife has given me a pathway to understanding the message of the story. When the

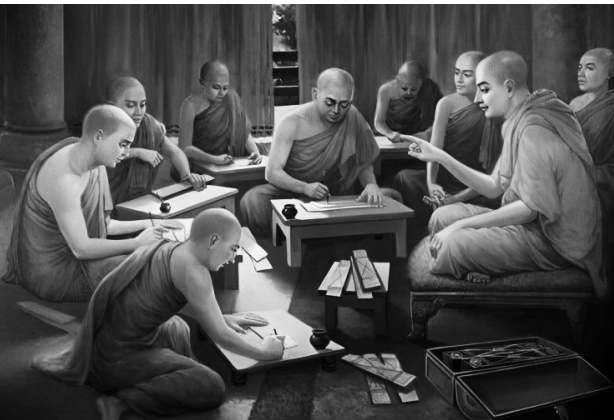
fulfillment and satisfaction just in the presence of another is hard to comprehend. I was surprised when I realized that my wife came to be content just with my presence. Surely, I had to say something to be interesting, or entertaining. My presence alone could have no meaning apart from a few attachments or actions. But I had to accept the fact that my mere presence was often sufficient and there was no need to justify being there.

When I saw the documentary of the octopus, I could recognize that over time, it was enough for the observer and her to just be present with one another. What makes it possible for this to be true? I think it shows us that when you drop attachments you become a safe haven. When one, completely and without any other attachment, trusts another, being in the presence of such trust is blissful and sufficient. Vakkali is an example of someone who had trust in the Buddha. He was given the gift of being present for the last birth of the Buddha before he achieved Nirvana. Being in the presence of the Buddha who had over many lifetimes practiced removal of attachments and was nearing his final moment of complete enlightenment, was a moment of trust. I think the story of Vakkali continued to be reworked and the meaning of trust as a way of practice was a challenge for generations. In other words, I learned that detachment was not indifference, not distancing from each other. It is just the opposite. Unclenching our hold on attachments that we have perceived to be crucial to our relationship can bring the possibility of greater closeness than we ever imagined. I will for the rest of my life be thankful that my wife and I had such a moment of closure to our life together and I haven't had to live with regret about the things unsaid or feelings unexpressed. I wish we could have shared at that level earlier, but I don't think it can be so until one is ready to let go of the ego and pride and feeling of entitlement for our personal selfhood. I have had many people in my life with whom I did not make good closure, including my grandmother, parents, one of my brothers, and two lifelong friends. Often, I find myself wanting to tell them something, but it is beyond the time allotted to us.

The Buddhist texts were right when they said, you need a raft to cross a stream but it does not profit you to carry it with you as an attachment. Like the octopus, we need to let go of attachments when their purpose is no longer needed. My wife and I did not sit through those days and hours regretting our

work, our contributions but we did recognize that our feelings for each other no longer required those things. We could rejoice in what we had accomplished, in our children, in our grandchildren, but in the dark pre-dawn hours of sharing we stripped all that away and had the great gift of being just ourselves, openly expressing our weaknesses, limitations, talents, achievements. Often, we broke into laughter when we could express the sometimes absurd way in which we had clung to our attachments. I have often been asked whether Buddhists can be detached and still have closeness and affection for others. My experience with my own life is that detachment from our constructed masks and barriers, is the only way to have the ultimate delight in the presence of another.

Buddhism teaches that one of the Three Jewels of the tradition is the community, the Sangha, the community of followers. Venerable Dhammajoti gave a memorable lecture at the University of Hong Kong, in which he pointed out that in the years when the community was in the presence of the Buddha, there was no need for rules of conduct. The community was firmly based on trust. It was only when the trust within the group had broken after the Nirvana of the Buddha that it became necessary to impose controls and external governance. It seems to me that Buddhism is in many ways more a religion of trust than what is meant in our English word “faith.” We don’t always need the attachments of



During the Buddha’s time, the monastic community was firmly based on trust, making rules of conduct unnecessary.

required practices to reach wisdom. Upaya, skill in teaching, whether for ourselves or for others, may be best expressed when we have detached ourselves from labels and titles. Just being in the presence of others who are trying to do the best that they can, allowing others to explore and find their own path, may be the highest form of teaching. Children often teach us that there are times that they just need to sit on our lap, be comforted by our presence, our acceptance of them, and at times our silence.

We live in a time when trust is a fragile state and we are not sure how to establish it. Perhaps the only way is to first find trust in ourselves and then share that trust with those around us: our families and friends as well as our associations and interactions. Trust in ourselves comes when we give up our attachments we have outgrown and allow others to see us without barriers. In turn we must learn to encourage trust between ourselves and those around us. The Buddhist teaching about detachment has always been a difficult one for individuals to comprehend. Yet, it is at the heart of the tradition. It is the act of opening ourselves to others. It is truly an act of compassion and loving-kindness. Trust is one of the outcomes of divesting ourselves of attachments. When we sense that there is nothing hidden, nothing held back, when there is full trust, there is no worry, no fear, no hesitation, just presence can be blissful. Not everyone is trustworthy, not everyone is free from attachments that obscure and distort experience.

Before we can begin to trust others, we have to first trust ourselves. This is an often repeated idea in the Buddhist message; we must first achieve or give benefit to ourselves before we have the insight that can benefit others. We all have many attachments, some are unconscious, others are seen as the only way to survive. We have secrets. Most dangerous are the secrets we keep from ourselves through denial of what is happening to us. I hope you know that I am not telling you that I have achieved some great enlightened state, for I assure you, it is not the case. During those last days with my wife, I was trying to comprehend and recognize attachments and we together were searching for how and when to let them drop. This lecture is one way that I continue my own search and attempt to deal with this issue.

I have had many people in my life with whom I did not make good closure before their death. Often, I find myself wanting to tell them something, to clear the air of all the barriers and unspoken feelings. Sadly, for so many it is beyond the time that was allotted to us.

2. On Social Relationships from the Perspective of Racism

A scholar of Nazi practices and beliefs in Germany points out that people fell into two categories. There were those who were considered to be sub-human, the unnatural, the retarded, who were beyond the rules of morality, while the



Regardless of skin color or race, we are all human.

Aryan “white” was superhuman. In such a system, as she points out there was no space left for the human. It seems almost beyond belief that we are still struggling with the idea of superiority of one race over another, of the very thought that differences separate us from one another. Hard to think that we are in danger of removing any space for the human in our nation. The upheavals on the streets about “Black Lives Matter” is a haunting reminder of the dangers of removing anyone from our moral and ethical system.

I am one of a small group of living people who has known someone who had been a slave. My childhood memory is of the ancient man who lived in a small cabin beside the road that we walked by in the summer. Our farm was split into two segments and when we worked in the distant fields, my brother and I passed by the man we knew as “Uncle Tom.” Born in that cabin to a mother who was a slave, he legally shared her fate. He was blind by the time of my youth but his hearing was very good and he knew us by hearing our footsteps. I am so sorry

that I didn't know enough to understand his importance. He represented a whole system that was once dominant but his memories were of no interest to us. Those memories were locked in his mind and I wonder what he experienced as in his last years of life, he sat smoking a home-made corn cob pipe. The only thing that I can do is to hold him in my memory and do my best to fight any racist tendencies that I spot in myself.

When I was five years old, a playmate told me that Black people were dirty and anything they touched was not to be touched by "us," the whites. It surprised me to hear it and I thought of one that I knew, Daisy. She was kind, comforting, and often helped prepare meals. Thinking of her, I knew the boy was mistaken, she was not dirty. In that moment of childhood, I turned my back on such racist attitudes and I am thankful to Daisy who showed me that she was just another human being.

I loved it that Uncle Tom knew my footsteps, knew me as a person without ever being able to see me. So Mark Twain was very insightful when he said, "We have to be taught again and again to be human." In his wonderful account entitled *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* of two runaways floating down the Mississippi River, he describes the moment when Tom hears his fellow traveler, Jim, a black man trying to escape his bondage as a slave, crying for his wife and children who have been sold away from him. Tom thinks, how strange, he has feelings for his family that are just like what a white person would feel. And in that moment, he realized that Jim is human and that the two of them are human. The idea that slaves had no feelings for their family, which Tom had believed to be true, was now challenged and refuted. I am humbled to know that partnerships and marriages in my family now include Afro-americans, Japanese, Jews, Latinos, gays, as well as an Irishman. I love to do the search for ancestors, to find them in England, Scotland, Holland, Germany, and France. My family with its spectrum of race and origin, again and again teaches me to be human and I try to live in a way that gives them my thanks.

