

Letting Go and Daily Life

An Interview with Ven. Thubten Chodron

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1. The Buddha says that attachment leads to suffering; hence, we should practice detachment in our lives. What does the Buddha mean by this?

By examining our own life experiences, we can clearly see that attachment leads to suffering. When our mind is needy or greedy, thinking, “I want this. I need that,” we aren’t at peace. We’re searching for something external to fill the emotional void inside our hearts, but external people and things don’t have the ability to do that.

How do we know that? Many times before we’ve gotten what we’ve wanted—delicious food, romantic relationships, prestige, and so forth—and while we may have been happy for a while, it didn’t solve the uneasiness in our hearts and minds. Why not? Because it’s not the lack of something that causes our mental and emotional suffering, it’s the attachment itself that does. Getting what we think we want or need doesn’t eliminate the attachment, it simply masks it for a while, and thus the dissatisfaction remains.

Under the influence of attachment, we lie and deceive others to get what we want. We retaliate, physically or verbally, when someone prevents us from procuring the love, appreciation, possessions, respect, fame, or ideal situation we want. This leads to problems in this life, and through creating so much negative karma, we create problems for ourselves in future lives as well. Our mind becomes more and more obscured, and we are further from enlightenment. While temporarily satisfying a craving may give us a hit of happiness, in the long run, it’s like drinking salt water—our thirst and frustration increase.

Detachment—maybe a better translation is non-attachment—is the state of mind that is the antidote to clinging and craving. It’s a balanced state of mind that is free from obsession. With it, we won’t be pulled here and there by the whims of attachment, but will be peaceful, content, and open.

Many people misunderstand the word “detachment” and think it means apathy or indifference. They have the image of Buddhists just sitting there like a bump on a log, shrugging their shoulders and saying, “I’m detached. I don’t care.” That is not non-attachment; that’s laziness and boredom, which are afflictions to be abandoned on the path.

When non-attachment is present, the mind is clear and we are able to exercise wisdom in our daily lives and make wise decisions. Free from the bias and prejudice of attachment, our heart is open and concerned with all beings equally. We feel connected to others and care about them. But this care is free from the expectations of attachment.

2. Can you provide some guidelines on how we can practice detachment without becoming monks or nuns?

Many people assume letting go of attachment is a painful process. They think, “I can’t have what I want and will be unhappy.” These people haven’t reflected on their own experience, as I mentioned above, and thus have come to an incorrect conclusion. Actually, the more we understand how clinging causes suffering, the more we’ll be eager, even joyful, to vigilantly counteract our attachment.

How do we do this? First, contemplate the disadvantages of attachment, clinging, and craving. Make many examples from your life so that you understand how so many of your repeated difficulties and emotional pain are due to attachment. When we see that clinging and craving harm us, we will have the energy to do something about them.

What do we do? Meditating on impermanence and death is an effective antidote. For example, when we see that the object, situation, or person that we’re attached to is changing every moment, we’ll understand that it’s impossible to hold onto it. One time I was in a park with a teenage girl, who was so distracted looking at the attractive guys playing basketball that she couldn’t enjoy the people she was with. I said to her, “You know, these guys are in the process of aging. Before too long, they’re going to look like that old man over there.” Her jaw dropped as she imagined them aging before her eyes. After that, she was able to enjoy our company during the picnic and had a lot of fun.

Through reflecting on our own mortality, we ask, “What is important in life? What goes on to the next life?” We see that the things we’re attached to don’t go with us into the next life, and in fact, the attachment to them makes us do many negative actions, and that karma will influence what we will experience. Through this wise reflection, we’ll begin to set priorities and will do what we’ve determined to be important for ourselves and others.

When we live according to wise priorities, our life is much more harmonious. This small taste of non-attachment brings peace in our mind. Through experiencing even a little of the happiness that comes from non-attachment, we’ll be inspired to let go of deeper and deeper attachments. As we do so, we’ll experience more and more satisfaction in our minds.

3. Some Buddhists, after undergoing long meditation practices, become introverted, reclusive, and want to let go of everything, including their responsibility as parents and breadwinners for the family. How can they reconcile their spiritual pursuits with their responsibilities?

At the Buddha’s time, some householders gained genuine understanding of the suffering of cyclic existence and the value of their precious human life. They chose to become monastics. These people were not abandoning their responsibilities. This is quite different from someone who has become introverted and reclusive in an unbalanced way and wants to neglect their responsibilities. People in the latter group may have an intellectual understanding or an emotional feeling of renunciation, but it’s superficial and unstable. Someone can redirect them, explaining that with a motivation of bodhicitta one is able to

fulfill their responsibilities as well as practice Dharma within having a family life and career.

To prevent this type of imbalance, it's important to include meditation on the four immeasurables—equanimity, loving-kindness, compassion, and joy—in our Dharma practice. In this way, we balance the compassion side of the path and the wisdom side of the path. We live in a world in which we are completely dependent on the kindness of other living beings. These sentient beings also want to be happy and avoid suffering as intensely as we do. It's essential to understand how deeply we are connected to others. It's reality, and in addition it prevents us from getting self-obsessed in our Dharma practice. Meditating on bodhicitta, the loving and compassionate aspiration to become a Buddha in order to benefit sentient beings, keeps us from getting stuck in our meditation practice.

4. Can the practice of detachment also lead to a state of indifference?

Not if people understand correctly what non-attachment means and how to cultivate it.

5. What about compassion—can too much of it lead to attachment, especially towards someone we love?

If it does, then it's contaminated compassion not genuine, compassion. Of course, for us ordinary beings, our loving-kindness and compassion are bias towards those people we're attached to. That's why meditating on equanimity towards all sentient beings is important. With equanimity as a basis, the love and compassion we cultivate become pure. For example, the love and compassion of a bodhisattva are extended equally to all living beings. They are unsullied by attachment, expectations, and disappointment and thus are stable and unshakable. Bodhisattvas don't lose their compassion if someone insults them or betrays their trust. Of course, due to social conventions and different social relationships, bodhisattvas act differently with each sentient being, but in their hearts, they care about all of them equally. It's said that bodhisattvas love us more than we love ourselves and that their compassion for us is deeper than our compassion for ourselves. Such love and compassion are difficult to actualize, but if we continue to practice the methods for doing so, we'll experience the result.

6. Can a husband and wife practice detachment and letting go in their relationship?

Yes, of course. The more they are able to let go of unrealistic expectations about each other, the more harmonious and satisfying their relationship will be. If a couple puts the Dharma at the center of their relationship, the ups and downs of life won't dismay them.

7. To inculcate spiritual values among children, how best can we teach them detachment or letting go?

By modeling it yourself! It's essential for parents to cultivate and live what they wish to teach their children. Children learn more by observing their parents, than by listening to

lectures. When parents cultivate appreciation and respect for other living beings, their children will directly see that happiness comes from caring about others, not through being attached to them. When parents cultivate generosity, their children will learn that joy comes from giving.

8. In the modern business environment, competition is the key word. How can we apply this principle of “letting go” in such an environment?

Someone who lets go and is less greedy will be more honest in his or her business dealings. Thus his clients and customers will trust him and will continue to do business with him as well as refer their friends to his company. In the long-term, this means his business will be more stable and successful. People who are greedy and competitive will do or say anything to make the business deal, including deceive the other person. Inevitably the other person finds out that they’ve been lied to or cheated and will no longer do business with that greedy and selfish individual. Thus, in the long term, honesty and genuine caring bring success and stability in one’s business.

9. Finally, Tibetan monks and nuns are cheerful and smiling whenever we meet them. Has this anything to do with their letting go of attachment?

Yes, I believe so. This goes not only for Tibetan monastics, but also for any human being who lets go of the afflictions of clinging and craving. Letting go isn’t accomplished by nonchalantly saying, “I don’t care,” but by actively applying the counter-forces to attachment and other afflictions and by cultivating compassion and wisdom.