

# Detachment

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# Detachment

“Consort not with those that are dear,  
never with those that are not dear,  
not seeing those that are dear  
and seeing those that are not dear, are both  
painful.”

(Dhammapada 210, tr. by Nārada Thera)



The Māra Saṃyutta of the Saṃyutta Nikāya provides us with superb acting by the three daughters of Māra, whose names are immortalised in temple murals, verse and song as Taṇhā, Rati and Rāga. Taṇhā is personified to represent the thirst to satisfy the senses, Rati represents the clinging or the insatiate thirst to satisfy the senses and Rāga represents the desire or the craving for the senses (*kāma*). They are, thus, the three dimensions of the all-pervading Desire present in man eager to drink his fill from the fountains of the senses. No wonder, then, that man clings convulsively to life when Death is about to lay his icy hands upon him. It should be noted here that these sense fountains are called

in Pali *āyatana*, in the sense that they lengthen Saṃsāric existence instead of shortening it.

*Kāma* or Lust stands both for Sense Desire and the object desired (*kilesa-kāma* and *vatthu-kāma*). In its highly intensified form it is known as Clinging to sense-desires (*kāma-upādāna*), the germ of future life or becoming (*bhava*). Man, in his ignorance or inability to see reality, invests it with a Self or Soul, when it comes to be called Clinging to a self or soul (*att'upādāna*). Thus arises the belief in a Self or Soul (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*). The deluded “being” called Man goes about saying: “This is my Self”, or “I have a Soul”, or “This is mine”, or “This belongs to me” and so on.

The Aṅguttara Nikāya (A III 55) gives a graphic description of this poor “Soul” running and sweating and demanding, for himself and those near and dear to him, the things of the world; not only demanding, but when frustrated, how he becomes the prime mover in causing untold misery to others and inevitably the cause of his own unhappiness and ruin. “Enraptured with lust, enraged with anger, blinded by delusion, overwhelmed, with mind ensnared, man aims at his own ruin, at others’ ruin, at the ruin of both parties, and he experiences mental pain and grief. But, if lust, anger and delusion are given up, man aims neither at his own ruin, nor at others’ ruin, nor at the ruin of both parties, and he experiences no mental

pain and grief. Thus is Nibbāna immediate, visible in this life, inviting, attractive and comprehensible to the wise.”

The three daughters of Māra danced, each one trying to excel the other. Lord Buddha sat beneath the Bodhi-tree and looked on with a mind free from lust (*vītarāgaṃ cittaṃ*) with a mind free from hate (*vītadosaṃ cittaṃ*), with a mind free from delusion (*vītamohaṃ cittaṃ*). The initial step to achieve these three supreme states of mind, he had taken six years before when as Prince Siddhattha, he left behind all that the heart of man is attached to, in other words, on that great night he made the unique renunciation—*nekkhamma*, the very opposite of sensual desire (*kāma-raga*)—and left home for homelessness (*pabbajjā*) in quest of Truth—the noble quest (*ariyapariyesanā*). Thus detached from all those that are dear, he strove ceaselessly for six long years, and ultimately gained Concentration (*samādhi*), which rewarded him with Wisdom (*paññā*), with Enlightenment and Nibbāna.

Permit me, at this point, to digress a little. We often hear the phrase “leaving the world” used to mean that a person has left behind much or little, donned the yellow robe of renunciation and sought the shelter of a sylvan hermitage. Yet, he is in the world, as much as you and I are in the world. Let us hear what the Blessed One tells of his supreme Renunciation. The

reader is referred to the Ariyapariyesana Sutta, Majjhima, No. 26: “I went from home-life (*āgārasmā*) into homelessness (*anagāriyaṃ*).” What he actually did was to change his environment from the pleasures of Kapilavatthu to the rigours of a solitary life on the banks of Nerañjarā. It was here that he developed his mind (*bhāvitaya*) to the highest peak of perfection and understood the world as it really is. Let me quote his words as recorded in the Rohitassa Sutta: “In this very one-fathom-long body along with its perceptions and thoughts, I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the path leading to the cessation of the world. “ In other words, the Buddha, as well as Arahants, have discovered the world (suffering) in this one-fathomlong body, namely the Four Noble Truths, the re-discovery of which by any one of us, in the manner taught by the Buddha, brings to an end the turmoils, the tribulations, the tortures, the tyrannies and the sorrows of saṃsāric existence. Hence, “to leave the world” really means to endeavour with determined zeal to achieve total abandonment of craving, the cosmic energy present in every being carrying in it the germ of suffering. And this supreme consummation, according to the Buddha Dhamma, can only be achieved as a human being, born in the cycle of a Buddha, while sojourning on this physical plane conventionally called the world—be it

in a forest glade, a mountain cave or in a cloistered sanctuary.

“In the world” according to the Buddha has only one meaning. It means in this very body. To the Buddha the body is synonymous with the world because of its breaking up and crumbling away. The “world”, also, stands for the five groups of clinging (*pañcupadānakkhandhā*), namely: matter or form, feelings, perceptions, mental tendencies and consciousness. Each of these is void, is empty, is insubstantial. It is the self-realisation of the voidness of each of the factors of the five groups of clinging that demolishes the belief: “This is mine”, “This am I”, “This is myself”. Thus Right Understanding of oneself as he really is leads to Right Intention or thoughts of non-covetousness or non-hankering (*anabhijjhā*) for this “world”. Thus the Path is paved to rid oneself of sense-desires which keep on feeding craving constantly and thus give rise to fresh rebirth or becoming (*bhava*). Therefore, one does not “leave the world”, but makes the best use of the “world” to put an end to the recurrent cycle of births and deaths.

I feel happy in the thought that I have diverted the digression into a channel in which flows the crystal-clear water leading to liberation. The more one contemplates on this “world” of the five groups of clinging the more does the urge to detach himself from

all family ties, to leave behind much or little property, to forsake one's friends—be they a small or a large circle—the more does this urge prompt him to go forth (pabbajjā) from home to homelessness. To the wandering ascetic Vacchagotta the Buddha said: 'There has never been a householder, Vaccha, who without forsaking household ties, has, at the dissolution of the body, made an end of suffering.'

Lord Buddha has succinctly formulated the arising and passing away of each of the constituents of the five groups of clinging in this wise:-

Thus is form, thus it arises; thus it passes away;  
Thus is feeling, thus it arises, thus it passes away;  
Thus is perception, thus it arises, thus it passes away;  
Thus are the mental formations, thus they arise, thus they pass away;  
Thus is consciousness, thus it arises, thus it passes away.

One who in his leisure moments of relaxation contemplates each of these items, and experiences the truth residing in each of them, is drawn closer and closer to the one reality of existence, which is impermanence. But, because of the callings of the domestic life, the continuity of his contemplation is

disturbed and interrupted. However, one who has experienced such moments of the impermanency of existence, concludes that bound by the demands of the household life, it is not possible to gain the perfect realisation of the truth of impermanency inherent in existence, its unsatisfactoriness and its impersonality. Then, there arises in him the irresistible urge to leave home for homelessness. This urge and its consummation are considered as selfish by those who are victims to the deluded belief in a Self.

Permit me to support my submission from a passage of the Ariyapariyesana Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya (No. 26) where Lord Buddha tells his disciples the reason for his Great Renunciation:

“Now I, O disciples, before my Enlightenment, being not yet fully enlightened, while I was a Bodhisatta myself, still subject to birth, decay, disease, death, sorrow and impurities, there came to me the thought, Why do I, being subject to birth, decay, disease, death, sorrow and impurities, thus search after things of like nature? How if I, who am subject to things of such nature, realise their disadvantages and seek after the unattained, unsurpassed, perfect security which is Nibbāna?”

“Then disciples, after some time while I was

still young, a black haired stripling, endowed with happy youth, in the prime of manhood, against the wishes of my father and mother who lamented with tearful eyes, I had my head and beard shaved, and, wearing yellow garments, went forth from home to the homeless state.”

As I mentioned earlier, when one’s mind is intellectually agitated in regard to the evanescence, the unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality of all existence, then there arises in him the inner urge to detach himself from all those near and dear to him in order to realise by his own efforts the utter voidness of life, and reach the goal taught by the Buddha. The mind is now engaged in a tug-of-war. On one side is the pull towards the domestic hearth, on the opposite is the pull towards faring forth (*pabbajjā*). The pull towards homelessness triumphs over the domestic life. This victory seals all attachment towards possessions, father and mother, wife and children, friends and relations. He now goes forth with a mind freed from worldly affection, and redolent with the Will for Deliverance (*muñcita-kamyatā*). Wherefore the Blessed One says in the Dhammapada: “Clearly perceiving one’s own welfare, let one be intent on one’s own welfare” (v. 166).

In this Buddha-statement welfare means one's ultimate goal, that is Nibbāna. This statement must not be given a selfish twist. What it does mean is that like a man whose head is on fire, one should first of all try to extinguish the fire of craving which is consuming the entirety of his being. The Buddha highly commends selfless service.

In certain quarters, this breaking away from one's kith and kin is stigmatised as a heartless act, as a betrayal of the trust and love divinely bestowed upon man by his Maker. Let me hoist these kind friends on their own petard. In the Gospel of St. Matthew at x. 37 it is clearly stated: "He that loveth father and mother more than me is not worthy of me, and he that loveth son and daughter is not worthy of me."

Detachment or the total giving up of attachment is, indeed, a supreme achievement, the result of a supreme effort of self-abnegation, which is the initial step, to the realisation by wisdom of the non-existence of a Self or Soul on which theists stumble and introduce a "Supreme Being" invested with the highest soul. There is no Being, but actually there is a Becoming - a mighty flow of efficient energy, with its characteristic of arising and passing away from moment to moment with no abiding eternal entity in it.

Detachment is an exceedingly rare commodity. It is because of its rareness that the Buddha says that only a few reach the Further Shore (Nibbāna) while the majority of beings run up and down on this shore. Detachment is the final flowering of the plant of life, the seed of which had been planted in the past, and through many a life in Saṃsāra; the plant that grew from it had been instinctively tended to by weeding out greed and hate that grew around it, and assiduously cultivating it with many a meritorious act of letting go. These were the people who felt that true freedom of mind lay in giving up everything, who came to feel the urge of the ascetic life, and to whom a few words from the Buddha or his Arahants were sufficient to bring about enlightenment and the end of suffering. But many were the people who heard the Buddha word, but their hearts were not properly tuned to receive it.

After the demise of the Buddha there were people who heard the Dhamma from the Arahants—people who had given up everything without the least regret—and gained illumination of mind to see things as they really are. To some people Detachment, that is to give up one's material possessions, leave behind parents, wife and children, friends and relations, appears as immoral, as unnatural, as moral cowardice, as a mental aberration and as the act of a fool. They

say that they perform their duties by their parents, wife and children, they associate with their friends and relations, and, on the whole, they are quite satisfied with the snug comfort of the domestic hearth. We do not want to dispute what they say. We would refer them to verse 214 of the Dhammapada:

“From attachment springs grief, from attachment springs fear; for him who is wholly free from attachment there is no grief, much less fear.”

(Tr. by Nārada Thera)

There are, also, a few people who in their heart of hearts yearn for the ascetic life; but do not possess the moral courage to break themselves away from family ties and associations. To such people the Buddha says:

“Wise people do not call that a strong fetter which is made of iron, wood or hemp; passionately strong is the care for precious stones and gold rings, for sons and a wife.”

“That fetter wise people call strong, which drags down, yields, but is difficult to undo; after having cut this at last, wise people take to the ascetic life, free from cares; and leaving the pleasures of sense behind.”.,

Dhammapada v. 345–346 (Tr. by Max  
Muller)

There are, also, some people, who have detached themselves from all that belongs to them, from their kith and kin, and having taken to the ascetic life, for some reason or other, best known to them, return to the lay life, from the free life of solitude to bondage. These are the people about whom the Dhammapada says:

“He who, having got rid of the jungle of lust, gives himself over to lust, and who, when free from the jungle, runs to the jungle, look at that man—though free, he runs into bondage!”

v. 344 (Tr. by Max Muller)

We now come to those very few people who, being really stirred by the misery of existence: the recurrent misery of being born, of decaying and of dying; whatever may be their ages, young, middle-aged or old, are overwhelmed by the urge to leave home for homelessness in order to walk the Path which the Buddha trod. Each one of them goes forth, chanting to himself:—

“May faith awaken my wisdom,  
May faith awaken my insight

To see things as they really are:  
Their arising and their vanishing,  
And reach the goal which the Buddha taught:  
The end of birth, old age and death”

These noble sons of the Buddha, having left father and mother, wife and children, relations and friends, wealth and sensual desires, roam at will in forest glades, reflecting on the many facets of the Dhamma, sorrowless, secure and alone like the rhinoceros. To them the Dhammapada pays this handsome tribute:—

“He who dwells in the Law, delights in the Law, meditates on The Law, recollects the Law; that Bhikkhu will never fall away from the true Law.”

v. 364 (Tr. by Max .Muller)

Thus a genuine disciple of the Buddha should conduct himself in accordance with the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, namely: Right Thought or Right Aspiration (*sammā saṅkappa*) to which are conjoined as auxiliary steps Right Understanding (the first factor of the Path), Right Effort (the sixth factor) and Right Mindfulness (the seventh factor). According to Dīgha Nikāya (No. 22) Right Thought is defined as follows:

1. Thoughts free from lust (*nekkhamma-*

*saṅkappa*).

2. Thoughts free from ill will (*avyāpāda-saṅkappa*),
3. Thoughts free from cruelty (*avihiṃsā-saṅkappa*).

Right Thought is again subdivided into: 1. Mundane Right Thought (*lokiya-sammā-saṅkappa*) the fruits of which are visible in this world and produce good results in the next, and 2. Supramundane Right Thought (*lokuttara-sammā-saṅkappa*) which is extra-sensory and extra-worldly and which occurs simultaneously along with the other seven factors of the Noble Path at the moment of Path consciousness (*maggacitta*). This thought originates in a highly developed and purified mind being the direct result of detachment, and it does not embrace “I”, “me”, or “mine”.

Man’s thoughts and actions are fundamentally dependent on three forces that lie dormant in his mind. Given the least provocation they prompt him to act in a manner detrimental to his own welfare, as well as to the welfare of others. These forces are: greed, hatred (aversion) and delusion. Greed or craving is attraction, while hatred is repulsion and delusion is one’s inability to see the real nature of things, and,

therefore, it is the parent of both attraction and repulsion. Thus man with deluded mind regards what he desires or craves as pleasant and lovable, and what he hates as painful and unlovable. It is this delusion that is the cause of the eternal conflict (*dukkha*) in man to be associated with the loved and to be parted from the unloved. Separation from the loved is suffering (*piyehi vippayogo dukkho*) and union with the unloved is suffering (*appiyehi sampayogo dukkho*).

Now, Lord Buddha saw that not only the five groups of existence, which put together is called a being, but also everything, animate and inanimate, in the cosmos is in a constant state of arising and passing away, everything is a constant change (*anicca*), and, that nothing is static (*nicca*) even for a split second. It is because of one's inability to see this real nature in the cosmos that man craves, and is greedy (*lobha*) to possess the loved or the pleasant which is in a constant state of change; and then he weeps, laments and grieves (*dosa*) when he loses the loved and the pleasant or is united with the unloved. In short, the cosmos is indifferent to human suffering, and, it is sheer folly to expect security or eternal happiness while one sojourns in a cosmos subject to constant change. All along it is *dukkha*. Therefore, detachment is the only way to put an end to *dukkha*.

How can there exist a Self or Soul in a cosmos

'subject to constant change'? Yet, poor souls who are unable to see this true state in nature cling to a self or soul. The Buddha-Dhamma alone, of all religious beliefs, categorically denies the existence of a soul or self. This denial is not a dogma. You and I can see it, if we totally detach ourselves from sense-desires and unwholesome things in the full glare of wisdom. Follow the Noble Eightfold Path in its triple division of morality, Concentration and Wisdom and you will be rewarded with the full comprehension of not-self (*anattā*).

This is the reward which crowns the ceaseless effort of the worldling (*puthujjana*) who has gone forth and first followed the Noble Eightfold Path in its mundane aspect. He is now no more a worldling. He is elevated to the sphere of a Noble One (*ariya-puggala*). It is at this precious moment that he perceives and realises the Supramundane Noble Eightfold Path, or, in other words, he enters the Stream (*sotāpatti*). As a Stream-Winner (*sotāpanna*), he is entitled to rank as a First Samaṇa. A Sotāpanna realises that nowhere is there to be found a self or soul. The Ego-belief (*sakkāya-ditṭhi*) in him is shattered. However, he has not yet totally eradicated the concept of a self. He eradicates it completely while standing on the threshold of Arahathood.

You will admit that it is purely due to selfishness

that man craves and is bound up with lust and pleasure, which give rise to fresh rebirth. It is only when he becomes fully aware of Not-self through his own efforts at gaining wisdom that he transcends the world of desires to the extra-sensory world, and graduating through the four stages and their immediate Fruits (*phala*), he cuts across the cosmic ocean of births and deaths to arrive at the Further Shore—Nibbāna. Detachment is the preliminary step to gain the knowledge of Not-self. However, those who love the world, and its so-called pleasures, will not be enamoured of leaving behind all that man holds as dear. May they also arrive at Wisdom, one day, to see Reality.

“How sweet the peaceful solitude of him  
Who has both learned and then perceived the  
Truth!  
Happy to be hate free—kind to all  
Happily rid of passion and desire  
And Self delusion—that is Supreme Joy,”

(Udāna 2. 1.)

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