
SIMPLICITY AND NON ATTACHMENT

Dharma Talk
March 14/15, 2009

In his teaching on the Four Facts of Life, Shakyamuni Buddha identifies *tanha*, desire or craving, as that which sets in motion the attachments which bring *dukkha* (suffering) to our lives. It is this clinging to or attachment that keeps us caught in the endless experience of dissatisfaction or lack that characterizes conditioned existence. If we can eliminate this, he says, we break the chain reaction of suffering, we free ourselves from all suffering.

End attachments? So, that's all it takes. Simple enough, right?

Today, as part of our theme of "Mountains or Marketplace?", we consider this letting go, this ending of desire, this releasing of all attachments.

Attachment to Things

Is it better for us to physically and emotionally separate ourselves from all of the temptations and objects of craving? Should we adopt a renunciant lifestyle, and like the joke about the Buddhist vacuum cleaner - it has no attachments - minimize and reduce our "footprint"? Should we simplify, leave things behind, retreat to the forests? How much, we might then have to ask, is enough? Is a new car every other year acceptable, or should we drive that beater into the

ground or do without a car? Conversely, might it be more preferable to change our relationship to things and objects. Then, we can acquire and have whatever we want, so long as we can be non-attached to these things. Can we somehow be in the midst of everything and be detached or even indifferent, (*sama* in Sanskrit) ? As the Christian phrase goes, to be *in the world but not of it*.

This kind of attachment - attachment to material objects - is confusing enough. Dharma distinguishes a number of other, more subtle attachments. There are attachments to habitual thoughts, emotions and ideas. Of course the most fundamental of these is our attachment to the belief that we have some permanent existence, *bhava-tanha*. That has many layers too.

We are attached to our gender, our ethnicity, our personality and so on. We construct the story of who we are from such things. Our likes (attachments), dislikes, affiliations, contexts and associations all contribute to the certainty about who and what we are. We shape our existence-story in reference to all of these.

The English Dharma teacher, David Brazier uses the expression "stickiness" when he talks about the mechanism of suffering. This captures some of the power of desire

as attachment. It shows how the belief in self is held together by the glue of our clinging. There is a sort of static electricity that holds together the story we call “myself”. It’s a fragile yet surprisingly resilient story, one which seems to find ever-new ways to divert us from seeing through its essential falsehood.

Attachment and Effort

A frequent question that comes up for practitioners has to do with the apparent contradiction between non-attachment and effort. We might ask, how can I want to deepen my practice, to serve all beings or attain Awakening and that not to be attachment?

To answer this, we are helped by three ideas: one, *bodhi-citta*, a mental disposition for Awakening, and, the second, *virya*, energy, and the third, *upekkha*, equanimity .

Let’s look at each of them.

1. *Bodhi-citta*, a mental disposition for Awakening,

This is one of the central virtues in understanding the idea of the bodhisattva, the Buddhas-to-be. We are encouraged to rouse or cultivate certain wholesome mind states or dispositions. These consciousnesses are how we direct our intentions and actions towards Awakening and to sustain our commitment to save all beings.

In Buddhist teaching there are countless consciousnesses, each one is like a tendency but with the power to form our conception of what we take as real. Which consciousness we cultivate will influence

how we direct our life’s energies and actions.

In some respects *bodhi-citta* is seen as its own energy, almost like a kind of salvation-force. While it is described as something we cultivate, it seems to also act as a kind of cosmic force that draws us to Awakening. In the same way that the bodhisattvas are always acting to inspire our Awakening, *bodhi-citta* is always active, like a gravitational force, bringing us to Awakening. In this respect, it is not a desire, that is, it isn’t something we crave or even a craving itself. It’s more that it is part of the fibre of Awakening. It is the beginningless force of Dharma which presents itself endlessly.

The next two, *virya* and *upekkha* are two of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment described in the classic *sutra*, *The Satipatthana Sutra*, The Teaching in the Way of Mindfulness. This Indian text identifies mindfulness, investigation of components of the material world, concentration, rapture, peacefulness and energy and equanimity as leading to Awakening.

2. *Virya*, energy,

The Satipatthana says : we should cultivate an energy which is “firm and unshaken”. The word comes from the same root as “heroism” and “honour”. Thus, it is how we direct ourselves to a kind of super-human scale of effort, and one which has a purpose to it. It is how we fulfill the very best and truest of what we are as beings. This is different from the kind of energy associated with passion or lust or greed, which is an energy of enclosure and possession. *Virya* is an opening up of a directedness which is natural and

necessary for us to be what we are.

3. *Upekkha*, equanimity

The *Satipatthana* says when we investigate our mind's activities we should "look with complete lack of preference for any of the mind's activities". It is one of the most common virtues in early Dharma where the capacity to stay even-minded was very highly valued.

Upekkha is also one of the Brahma Viharas we recite at the end of each sitting where we say "may all our practices be without obstruction or distraction". Its inclusion in this quartet ties it together with compassion, loving kindness and sympathetic joy. This reveals that *upekkha* is more than a kind of cool detachment. It springs from an understanding of the common suffering of all beings, and the recognition that it is that suffering which also links us all together. Equanimity,

then, has to do, then, with a recognition that there is nothing exceptional in whatever we experience, since our experience belongs to the pool of experience of all beings, especially at the level of unrelenting suffering.

Reading and Exercises

This month we have a reading which takes this theme of Non-attachment into the possibility of Voluntary Simplicity. You also have some provocative exercises to help you to explore non-attachment and simplicity in your own lives.

Ray Innen Parchelo
Dharma Instructor