

DETACHMENT - A Way of Life

A group of Buddhists in rural Wisconsin organized a solitair retreat, and they invited me to teach meditation. I was also asked to provide personal counseling on a one-on-one rotation basis while the others meditated.

My first counseling session was with Mary, a very frustrated young woman who was pregnant with her second child. She was married to Mario, an Italian national who had been living in the United States for five years. He was the father of her eldest child and also of the one who was due in about two months.

Mary told me that even though she loved Mario, he was irresponsible; he had no desire to work and provide for her and the children, and he was a constant partygoer who always returned home late. She said that she couldn't understand why Mario was this way because he was always telling her, "I am a Buddhist, and I practise detachment." This caused Mary to be confused about Buddhism and even more frustrated with Mario.

After hearing Mary's side of the story I said to her, "Mario's interpretation of Buddhist teaching is not exactly correct. In its essence, but before I say anything further I think I had better speak with him directly."

So, my second session was with Mario, who came to me reluctantly, because Mary had insisted. Mario was a handsome, rugged sort of man who seemed to not have a care in the world.

"Mario, please be seated," I said to him. He gave me a big smile and sat down. It was obvious to me that he was relaxed in my presence.

"Bhante, I have a feeling that you are psychic. I think you know a lot about me even though we just met. Is this true?"

"Mario, we are not here to talk about me or my psychic ability. We are here to talk about you. Please tell me what your plans are?"

I could tell that my reply caught him off guard. I could also tell that Mario was used to being charming and having the upper hand in conversation.

"Bhante," he began, "I am like a bird. I am a free man, and within two weeks I'll be leaving for Europe."

"How can you do that? Your wife is expecting a baby soon."

"But Bhante, I didn't want any children."

"You should take care of her and not abandon her and your children, is this not true?"

"Bhante, you sound like a Catholic priest."

"Of course, Mario," I responded. "All priests, regardless of their religion, will give the same advice not to shirk paternal responsibilities."

Mario looked at me defensively and said, "I have read Herman Hesse's book Siddhartha fourteen times. I can even recite many parts of it from memory. I am following Siddhartha's way of life. I do not have attachment to anything, not even to my own child. I am following the teaching of Buddhist detachment." So whenever I wish to go, I go. Wherever I want to sleep, I sleep. I lead a very easygoing life."

"Mario, the book Siddhartha, which is your bible, is not a Buddhist book. It is a beautifully written novel, which has touched the hearts and minds of many readers. It has also caused a number of readers to become curious about Buddhism. But Mario, Herman Hesse was not a practising Buddhist, or even a Buddhist scholar. In fact, Hesse was a German novelist and philosopher who merely had very romantic notions about the nature

of Buddhism. In addition, you should be careful about using the term detachment in the Buddhist sense, because I am quite positive that you do not understand what it means."

"Bhante, what are you talking about? Siddhartha himself abandoned his wife and son and left the palace even without permission from his parents. He was the heir to the kingdom; what do I have to lose?"

"Mario, Siddhartha never abandoned his wife and child. He asked his parents for permission and left with parental blessings."

"That is not what I read," he replied with emotion. "It completely contradicts your statement."

"Mario, have you read the early Buddhist canon, which was recorded before the fourth century BCE?"

"I have not, Bhante. I could see that Mario was beginning to become a bit uncomfortable. I continued with, "In the Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha, 'The Noble Search,' and 'The Greater Discourse to the Saccaka,' it is explicitly mentioned that Prince Siddhartha left the palace with his parents' permission. Furthermore, in Lalitavistara, a Sanskrit text from the first century BCE, it says: 'My son, your desire for the emancipation of the world is worthy of encouragement as it will be beneficial for all mankind. May your wish be fulfilled.' According to the early texts, the Prince never abandoned his wife. He provided for all of her needs, and for luxuries as well, and with her permission, he left the palace to pursue his enlightenment."

"I also told you this, Mario. There was a well-known Buddhist commentator who lived in the fourth century CE, named Buddhaghosa. It was he who misconstrued the facts and added the abandonment myth to give the story a poetic, or even somewhat dramatic, effect. Also, I would like you to read Old Path, White Clouds by Thich Nhat Hanh. He, too, through his investigation of the early texts, supports that fact that Prince Siddhartha left his wife and family with permission."

"Bhante, I suppose you are right, but you are talking about the Theravada Interpretation. I am following Zen practice, which is Mahayana. Therefore, my detachment is Zen detachment."

"Mario, just so you are informed, Thich Nhat Hanh is a Mahayana Zen master. Also, you are not the only Easterner who calls himself a Buddhist who only understands the literal definitions of attachment and detachment. The fact that you practise Zen meditation has nothing to do with your understanding of this very important Buddhist theme. I could tell that Mario was on the verge of getting angry with me, particularly because I wasn't impressed by his Zen practice, or by his reading of Herman Hesse. I paused for a moment before I continued, and I thought of an anecdote that I felt was appropriate. "Mario," I began, "I would like to tell you a story about a man named Ted who was constantly changing his girlfriends. When I questioned him about this, he replied unabashed, 'I practise nonattachment. If I stick to one person, I will become attached to her. This I have learned from my master.'"

"I replied to Ted that I believed he had misunderstood his master. I also told him that it seemed he was attached to his nonattachment, much the way I think you are, Mario."

When a person is in love with another person, then he or she has to accept the responsibilities that go along with that love. Otherwise, it is not love at all, but merely an impersonal lust. Love is a state of unity, which is experienced physically as well as mentally. With love, there is caring, forgiveness, and commitment. Buddhism teaches that love unites,

whereas your theory of detachment results in fragmentation."

Mario replied, "Getting back to Ted, I think he is right, Bhante."

"Mario, I believe you were born a Catholic."

"It is truly nearly everyone is a Catholic, Bhante, and for a number of years I even studied in a seminary to become a Catholic priest."

I was very surprised to hear this, but I responded, "That's good, Mario. Do you remember Luke fourteen, verse thirty six? It says, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. What Jesus meant here was not literally to hate your family and yourself, but to renounce the world. If you take this passage literally, you would hate your family and yourself. But what he meant here was to renounce.'"

"I see your point, Bhante."

"Even the Buddhist Dhammapada has a story very similar to the Christian one, and I'll share it with you. One day when the Buddha was in his Jetavana monastery, he saw a monk named Bhaddiya coming toward him. The Buddha remarked, 'Bhikkhu, look at that monk: he has killed both his father and his



mother and he goes about without feeling any remorse. The Bhikkhu could not understand this statement because that particular monk had committed no crime."

"Then the Buddha explained that he was referring to an Arahant, who has eradicated craving, conceit, wrong beliefs, and attachment to the sense bases and the objects of the senses. The Buddha had made this statement using metaphors. The terms 'mother and father' are meant to be crying and conceit."

"Oh, Bhante, that's too heavy for me. I don't understand."

"Let me explain an experience I once had. Several years ago when I was preparing to leave the temple for a funeral service, John, a meditation practitioner, came rushing toward me, pleading with

the monk said to me, "You kill yourself!" I was shocked, Bhante, and I said to him, "Beg your pardon?" Again the monk repeated, "You kill yourself. You kill yourself!"

"Mario, if you were in my position, what advice would you have given John?"

Mario replied with a grin, "I would tell John to file a complaint at the police station against the Zen master."

"Mario, let me explain. When the monk told John to kill himself, he meant that he should kill his 'self' or his ego, not end his life or do harm to his body. Mario, you are faced with the same problem. You attraction is a desire that is aroused in an individual and leads to satisfying his or her basic physical needs. Mario, it seems that you have sixty percent sexual attraction, thirty percent loving kindness, and only ten percent personal affection."

"Bhante, you have given me much food for thought. Could you help me find a way to live a happy medium and still be detached?"

"As I mentioned earlier, your theory of detachment is completely incorrect. You are attached to that incorrect view. You should be able to face challenges, not run away from them. When you live with another person, regardless of your marital status, you are responsible for doing your best to promote each

respect, and be faithful to their wives. They should love, be attentive, provide for the basic needs, and take care of the children."

"I think the mother must also share this burden," he replied.

"Yes, both parents have to share this responsibility. A mother's duty is to love, care for, and protect the children. Parents are responsible for the well-being and upbringing of their children. The father should be the son's role model."

"I continued, "Do you know that many Sri Lankans have immigrated to the United States mainly to educate their children? These people, whom I know personally, lived very comfortable lives in Sri Lanka and did not lack anything. Yet, for their children's education they have sacrificed their lives of luxury to live in America. They do not lead an easy life here, and with great difficulty, they support the children until their education is completed. Most Sri Lankan students do not work while studying. The children of these Sri Lankans are very fortunate to have such dedicated and sacrificing parents. The children appreciate the hardships the parents endure, and they often become successful figures in this society."

"Bhante, I should follow the Sri Lankan tradition. On second thought, I may not go to Europe. I want to invite you to my house before you leave. I am being attached to you now."

I was relieved to hear Mario's decision, and I was happy that I had been able to lead Mario to understand his personal responsibilities and to redefine his understanding of Buddhist detachment.

A short verse from the Dhammapada sums it up nicely:

**Why do now what you will regret later?
Why bring future tears upon yourself?
Do only what you are sure you will not regret
And you will always be filled with joy.**

When a person is in love with another person, then he or she has to accept the responsibilities that go along with that love. Otherwise, it is not love at all, but merely an impersonal lust. Love is a state of unity, which is experienced physically as well as mentally.

me to listen to him. I told him to talk to the visiting Zen meditation master as I was already late. I returned after two hours to find John still waiting for me. He was visibly upset and told me that the meditation master had agreed with him when he expressed his desire to end his own life. I told John that I didn't believe this was true, because the first principle of monkhood is to never encourage anyone to take a life, including one's own. I knew that John must have misunderstood, and I asked him to please explain exactly what had happened.

"John answered, 'Bhante, I was so depressed that I wanted to kill myself, and I told the Zen master of my intention. After a long pause,

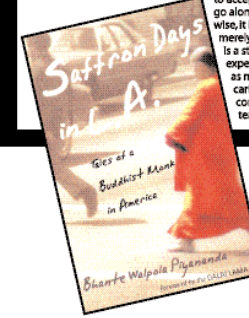
are using the word nonattachment as a shield to cover your weaknesses and to run away from your responsibilities, you have to take care of Mary. You are legally married and you have children with her. She is your life. Please understand that a successful relationship depends on three important elements: the first is metta, or loving kindness; the second is pema, or personal affection; and the third is raga, or sexual attraction."

"Loving kindness means having compassion for all human beings. Personal affection means to have feelings of respect, love, and emotional attachment for your parents, siblings, and also for your wife and your children. Sexual

other's happiness. You should help each other maintain a happy, well-balanced life. By practising consideration you will be able to make Mary happy. If she is not happy, how can you or the children be happy? The root cause of family strife is lack of communication and understanding. Have you spoken to Mary about your European vacation?"

"Yes, Bhante, she is furious with me, and she argues about it day and night. I am sick of it. She wants to make me feel guilty because she is pregnant. She wants child support for my son, but she doesn't want the two-year-old to join me on my holiday."

"Mario, our Lord Buddha has advised all husbands to honour,



Saffron Days in L.A. Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America

Ven. Walpola Piyananda Thera, Founder and Viharadhipati of Dhamma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara in Los Angeles, California shares his experience of life in America in his maiden literary work Saffron Days in L.A., which we are privileged to serialise every Saturday beginning today. With calm and compassion characteristic of a Buddha putra he dispassionately unravels the trials and travails of the life of a Buddhist monk in an alien country captivating the hearts and minds of the reader. The stories in the collection reveal the complex, contrived, joyous, painful, intriguing and inspiring aspects of human condition and the power of true compassion. The present story as an excellent analysis of the Buddhist concept of detachment though written in a lively narrative style.

NB: Comments and feedbacks should be addressed to Editor, Daily News or sent via electronic mail to editor@dailynews.lk

Next week A lady of the Night