

Detachment

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Detachment is a major spiritual discipline in the life of every disciple. It consists literally of getting rid of attachments. But what are these attachments? There are many: things that for a time we believe are necessary; things that we cannot live without; things that “make life worthwhile.” But in order to progress spiritually, we must be prepared to give them up because they form the baggage that weighs us down... slows us down. In identifying these attachments we can learn much—not just about the nature, purpose, and challenge of the spiritual practice of detachment but also about ourselves. Detachment means relinquishing the lesser in favor of the higher. It operates on every level, challenging us each time we strive to raise the focus of consciousness to the next higher level.

We start by letting go of physical attachments. There are numerous physical attachments, or what Ken Keynes refers to as “addictions:” over-indulging in the right things or indulging in the wrong things. It is not that most of these things—food, beverages, sex, music, physical pursuits, money, comforts, and so forth—are wrong in themselves. They are essential components of physical-plane existence. But they impede our growth when they become ends in themselves and when we think we cannot do without them. They distract attention from more important things, and the need for them may force us into poor choices. Rather than getting up early to meditate, we stay an extra half-hour in bed; rather than using our money we want to keep it.

Much the same applies on the emotional level. There are many emotional attachments: desire, infatuation, jealousy, anger, envy, pride, ambition, the pursuit of power, depression, pity, loathing. Like the objects of physical-plane attachments, emotions are generally pleasant; people even wallow in negative ones like depression, and most emotions are much more enjoyable than that. In limited quantities, most emotions are beneficial. Pity for the condition of the people in famine areas prompts the establishment of relief programs. Anger at the condition of oppressed people encourages liberation movements and social reform programs. Ambition motivates people to better themselves economically, socially, educationally, and/or spiritually.

Emotion is a great motivator. But by itself, emotion is a blind force. It is sufficiently powerful to overcome us if we do not control it, and there is a temptation to accept emotion as though it were uncontrollable. We accept our addiction to power, even though many people are hurt by it. We recognize that we have a violent temper that endangers those around us, but we say “I can’t help it; that’s just the way I am. You must take me how you find me.” We are continually hurt by other people’s (intended or unintended) remarks and actions, and say “I’m sensitive.” We recognize our inability to form stable relationships. But we say “I cannot help falling in love with every woman/man I meet; I am simply an emotional person” or “I simply have a lot of love to express.”

On the other hand, stable relationships may themselves conceal strong emotional attachments. Attachments bind us to other people, and them to us. We cling to our parents, siblings, children, and friends because we are too insecure to face independent existence. But in the process we stifle our own growth and theirs. One of the most subtle types of emotional attachments may be to a spouse. In the marriage relationship, detachment is necessary to enable our spouse room to grow—perhaps even to the point where he or she may decide to break away and go elsewhere. Marriages and other long-term relationships must involve continually renewed commitment, on both sides, and not emotional captivity of the possessed by the possessor. To find the middle ground between commitment and possession is the great challenge of one-to-one relationships.

Physical and emotional attachments often are easy to recognize—although not necessarily easy to overcome—because most of us have learned to function to a limited degree on the mental level. This is a tribute to the progress of the fifth root race. But attachments also exist on a mental level, and these are much more difficult even to recognize. We can readily see the forest, the trees (and the weeds) from a hilltop, but we cannot see them so clearly when we are down in the thicket. Mental attachments are limiting—or in some cases unfounded—beliefs, attitudes, or mindsets that we accept as necessary and inevitable. We believe we are worthless, meant to stay “within our station,” rise socially, solve all the world’s problems, have a message for mankind, be all-powerful, or sent by God. We believe that capitalism, socialism, anarchy, theocracy, fundamentalism, existentialism, or nihilism represents the only valid social or philosophical system.

We believe that our own religious doctrines represent the whole of truth and that alternative doctrines must therefore be false or evil. We believe that we will go to heaven, purgatory, limbo, hell, or nowhere. We believe that in order to advance spiritually we must go to the Himalayas, into a nunnery, or to California. We believe what our parents believed or what we have been told by a minister, psychic, TV evangelist, news anchorman, entertainer, politician, sports star, smart person at the office, or friend. When our beliefs are threatened our whole life falls apart. We react emotionally: “Run him out of town,” “Pass a law to stop her,” “Throw him in jail,” “Fire her,” “Burn his books,” “Burn her at the stake.” We *believe* ever more strongly, trying to hold onto what we have begun to suspect is no longer true.

Many attachments cut across physical-emotional or emotional-mental boundaries. We “must” have the brown cereal bowl; we “must” get the parking place near the door. We must work in the city, on the farm, from eight to five, or for a charitable organization. We “must” live this side of the tracks and send our children to that school. Our daughter “must” marry the right kind of person. We “can’t” vote for a black, Catholic, Hispanic, native Hawaiian, Chinese, atheist, homosexual, confessed adulterer, reformed alcoholic, or person who once received psychiatric care. We “must” go to church, into the church, to college, into medicine, into the family business, or to the colonies.

Our attachments are limiting, but they are also our security blankets. They give us a sense of belonging at a time when we lack confidence. We prefer the company of people who share the same attachments, and feel threatened by people who have overcome them or who have different ones. But attachments represent poor spiritual economics. We cannot “take them with us,” so they represent an investment of scarce resources in something of only temporary value. While we must eat to live, nobody’s chakra petals have ever been opened by overeating.

Our physical appetites need to be put into a right perspective and used for the benefit of the whole person. In turn, our emotions must be controlled; they need direction, and should be used in amounts that are appropriate to the situation at hand. We must become detached from our emotions and exercise dispassion. We must learn to use emotion as a motivator—particularly as a motivator for action on the physical plane. But our emotions must be under the control of the mind. We must become open-minded—not to the degree (as one commentator has warned) that our brains fall out—but enough to permit us to grow. If we insist on “becoming as little children,” it will be hard to grow up and function as mature adults. If we insist on total consistency of beliefs, we deny ourselves the opportunity to witness unfolding reality or an expanding worldview. Little inconsistencies are like genetic variations in species; they provide the opportunity for evolution. We must give our minds the opportunity to explore, to learn, to grow, to experience, to determine what is right and what is wrong. We must develop discrimination.

We need to learn to use our minds and, in turn, our emotions and physical drives, for adult rather than childish purposes. The end product of this process is integration of the personality to produce the “well-rounded,” mature individual. But is that the end of the story? What is it to control the mind? What should be the basis for discrimination? The answers to these questions lie in the recognition of the human soul and its function. The personality is a temporary creation of the soul for the immediate purpose of soul experience, together with some less immediate purposes, such as redemption of the substance of the lower planes. We become aware of the relationship between personality and soul only at a certain point in our own evolution. For a long time, the personality seems to represent the totality of human existence. But once we reach that point, there is obvious potential—and a more or less compelling urge, based on their relative importance—to extend the focus of consciousness from the temporary personality to the eternal soul. Recognition of a higher Self opens up the possibility of further integration, this time of the personality with the soul. Moreover, it leads to the conclusion that the next step is developing detachment from the personality.

Detachment from the personality, like the lower forms of detachment, requires us to put the personality into its proper relationship with that which is higher. The soul is the proper directing agency of the mind—and in turn the whole personality—in the same way that the mind is the directing agency of the emotions, and the emotions of the physical body. At some future stage in our development, the soul, too, will become the target of detachment, as we extend our consciousness to the Monad. Then we must learn to put the soul into its proper perspective and relationship.

At each successive level, detachment involves the recognition that some part of us is good in itself, but must be subordinated to the good of the whole, must be integrated with what lies above and below in the hierarchical structure of the human entity. An important point is that detachment does not imply the rejection of our lower vehicles as worthless, sinful, or “dirty.” The lower vehicles are not ugly appendages thrust upon us by original sin, until such time as we can manage to rid ourselves of them. Rather, they are the creation of our higher vehicles, brought into being to serve a vital role both in our individual development and in the cosmic scheme of things. Moreover, the lower vehicles will continue to serve a useful function, even after we have mastered proper detachment. Indeed they will be able to serve an even greater function because blocks to the flow of energy from one level to another will have been swept away. Our mission, up to the time of the fifth initiation, is to work in the world. To accomplish this mission, we need a set of tools, including a physical body, emotions, mind, and soul. These must be integrated with one another, each playing its proper role in support of the higher destiny of our human existence.