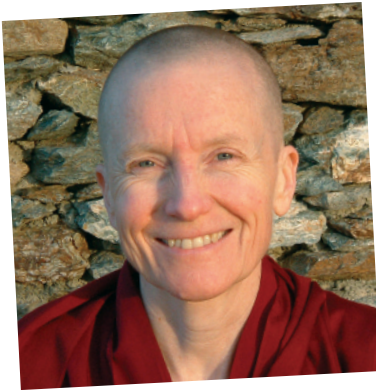


Attachment Hurts



Answered by Ven. Sangye Khadro

READER QUESTION:

Are Buddhist monks and nuns required to be celibate? Is this requirement related to our task as Buddhists to give up attachment? How can I, as a lay practitioner not practicing celibacy, work to give up attachment as well?

Yes, all Buddhist monks and nuns take a vow of celibacy, which means refraining from sexual activity with anyone. And yes, the main reason for being celibate *is* to decrease attachment/desire. It would be extremely difficult to overcome desire while being involved in sexual relationships; it's easier to do this work in a celibate lifestyle. However, to answer the third question, yes, there is plenty to do as a lay practitioner if giving up attachment is your goal.

A lot of Westerners have difficulty understanding what's wrong with attachment and why we need to get rid of it; some people even think we can't be happy without it. So I would like to try to explain why attachment is not only unnecessary and unhelpful, but an actual hindrance to *real* happiness.

According to Buddhism, all beings wish to be happy and to not suffer, and we all *deserve* to be happy and free of suffering. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be happy, but what most people don't realize is that there are different kinds of happiness, ranging from sensory pleasure up to the bliss of full enlightenment, the highest form of happiness possible. Most of the happiness we un-enlightened beings experience is sensory pleasure: seeing attractive objects, hearing beautiful sounds, feeling pleasant sensations in our body, and so on. Such experiences *are* enjoyable, but they have their limitations:

- they are impermanent
- they depend on external factors, which are also impermanent and not always available
- while we experience them, our mind is usually not calm and stable, but is disturbed by grasping, confusion, anxiety or unrealistic expectations.

Sensory pleasure isn't the only kind of happiness that exists. There are other, better kinds of happiness – they last longer, are less dependent on external factors, and are experienced with greater calmness, clarity and stability. For example, there are various meditative states – the four concentrations and four formless absorptions – that are said to be much more blissful and satisfying than sensory pleasure. In order to attain these states we have to cultivate single-pointed concentration, and one of the biggest hindrances to concentration is attachment to sense pleasures. We can see this for ourselves – when our mind gets distracted during meditation, it usually runs to objects of attachment. Just as a bird can't fly as long as she clings to the branch she's sitting on, we can't attain higher states of meditative bliss as long as we cling to the five sense objects. So this is one reason we need to overcome attachment: in order to attain single-pointed concentration and experience the more sublime happiness it brings.

But Buddhists don't attain concentration just to experience bliss, because the bliss of mere concentration is still *samsaric*, and therefore transitory and not completely free from suffering and its causes. The real purpose of developing concentration is to attain still higher goals: liberation and enlightenment. These states are even more blissful than the ones attained through mere concentration, and are also more stable – in fact, they last forever because once attained, they are never lost. We all have the potential to attain these states, as long as we create the right causes and conditions, and one of these causes is freeing our mind from the disturbing emotions (delusions), including attachment. To eliminate delusions, we need not only concentration but also wisdom, especially the wisdom realizing emptiness. So here again, attachment is an obstacle to attaining the highest forms of happiness – liberation and enlightenment. We simply can't reach these without giving up attachment.

It is important to clarify what is meant by the term “attachment,” as it can mean different things to different people. According to Buddhism, attachment is a mental factor that perceives certain objects as attractive, exaggerates their attractiveness, and then wants to possess and retain them. Attachment paints an exaggerated, unrealistic picture of the object so that it appears more wonderful than it really is, and as something that will make us happy. We usually buy into this story and get hooked, like a fish on a line – our mind gets stuck to the object, wanting to own it and never be separate from it.

Attachment can be difficult to recognize, although it’s probably our most common delusion. And it can be even more difficult to see as a delusion, a cause of problems, because it seems to bring happiness. Here are some of its problems:

It disturbs our mind, making it unpeaceful and unclear. It can even make us out-of-control or obsessive, unable to think of anything besides our object of attachment. It can also cause our moods to go up and down: we’re happy when we get what we want, miserable when we don’t.

It can lead to other disturbing emotions. Because of attachment to people and things, we can become selfishly possessive and even manipulative, fearful about losing what we are attached to, jealous when others have more than we do, and angry if our object of attachment is harmed or taken from us.

It can motivate unskillful actions – for example, killing, stealing, lying or sexual misconduct. These actions are the cause of problems in future lives, and can also bring many problems in this life, both for ourselves and for others.

It leads to dissatisfaction, not satisfaction. Shantideva said that following attachment never leads to real happiness, because if we want something and don’t get it we’ll be miserable, but even if we get what we want, we’ll eventually be miserable.

It interferes with our spiritual practice: by making our mind distracted when we are trying to meditate, pray, study or do virtuous actions. Our motivation for spiritual practice can become polluted by desire for respect, fame, gain or mere short-term pleasure.

It leads to more attachment. Each time we buy into attachment rather than apply antidotes, it leaves an imprint

or seed in our mind that will cause another experience of attachment to arise in the future. It’s like what happens in nature: a tree comes from a seed, and then produces more seeds, which produce more trees, and so on – an endless process!

Attachment causes problems and suffering, for ourselves and for others, both now and in the future. If we can recognize this, we naturally want to be free from it. This takes time, because it is such a deeply-ingrained and pervasive mental habit. But it is definitely possible to decrease and eventually eliminate it altogether, by working on applying antidotes. The ultimate antidote is the wisdom realizing emptiness, but that’s a difficult one. An easier, more practical one is contemplating impermanence – understanding that the things we’re attached to will change and eventually disappear helps us to realize that it’s pointless to be attached to them.

It’s also helpful to live a simpler lifestyle, to learn to be content with what we have and to give up things we don’t *really* need. Such a lifestyle will reduce our attachment, and also give us more time – and a clearer state of mind – for spiritual practice. Learning to be more loving and compassionate is another way to decrease our attachment. Attachment tends to be self-centered: “I want to keep you close to me because you make *me* so happy.” Love, on the other hand, is focused on others: “What can I do to make *you* happy?”

All problems basically boil down to the three “poisons” of anger, attachment and ignorance, and as long as our mind is not free from these, we take them with us wherever we go. So even in a monastery or solitary mountain cave, the three poisons can come up and create havoc. The whole purpose of Buddhist practice is to recognize and acknowledge them, apply antidotes to them, and cultivate positive states of mind such as love, non-attachment and wisdom. This is true for all of us, whether we are monastic or lay. Practicing celibacy is a powerful way to decrease the poison of attachment/desire, but if that isn’t an option, there are plenty of other ways to work on our mind. ☸

Originally from California, Ven. Sangye Khadro (a.k.a. Kathleen McDonald) began studying Buddhism in India in 1973, and was ordained as a nun at Kopan Monastery, Nepal in 1974. She is the author of the best-selling Wisdom Publication book How to Meditate, and is currently following the FPMT Masters Program in Italy.

Please submit your questions for “A Teacher Tells us Why” to: michael@fpmt.org