

## Detachment

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, July 25th 2007

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Tonight I decided I'd like to talk about detachment. I don't think I've talked about this before, have I? It's a concept that's important in a lot of traditions—it's big in the Christian tradition, it's big in Buddhism, it's big in Hinduism.

I'm not sure what the word is in these other languages but in Christianity, in early Christianity and monasticism, the word for detachment was 'apathea'—where we get the word 'apathy.' My objection to both 'apathy' and 'detachment' is that the way we use those words now doesn't mean what I think they meant, or at least what *I* would mean by detachment. They have negative connotations. Not an attractive concept for most people because 'detachment' seems to connote either giving up things and living a very austere life, not enjoying material things in life, or it seems to mean being aloof from emotional involvement, being detached means not to be engaged in life, not to feel things, not to have ordinary human emotions. I don't think either of those are accurate; it's not what I would mean by 'detachment.'

'Apathea' means—'a' means 'without,' but 'pathea'—from a similar root as 'pathos'—it's not only emotions and feelings but it also means 'suffering' in some contexts, where we get the term 'the passion,' and it can also mean 'experience.' What's common to all these things is you undergo, you're the subject of something. In the passion, Jesus was subject to what other people wanted to do to him; he underwent this experience, he didn't have control over it. Feelings are things that come upon us and take us where we may not want to go; in a fit of anger you may do something that you later regret, that you wouldn't have done, right? So feelings can sometimes enslave you, and cause you to act in ways that are other than what you'd like to be. 'Experience,' obviously, is just a broad term for the things that we undergo, things that happen to us.

So the general sense of the 'pathy' part of apathy is being the subject of things happening to you, rather than being the one who acts, the one who does, the one who responds. You're carried along by the currents of life. To be apathetic in this original sense meant to be free from these types of constraints, from these types of enslavements, and attachments were thought of as chains, binding us.

This idea of detachment in the Christian tradition is also associated with the first commandment—sometimes it's the first, sometimes it's the second, depending on how you're counting them—but the idea 'there shall be no other god before me.' To be attached to anything of the world meant you're putting that before God, or it has the potential to come between you and God. So to become apathetic, to become detached, meant not to allow anything to become more important than God in your life.

There's other references where they reach into the bible to find allusions to detachment, such as Jesus saying 'anyone who loves father, mother, sister, brother more than me is not worthy of me'—the idea even attachment to family, family members, can be something that keeps you apart from God.

So what is it that replaces it? This is what I want to talk about. If it's purely this negative sense of not being attached, you don't get a positive sense of what's good about it. What does it mean to be free to have God as the leading thing in your life, or in the Buddhist terms if you're detached from all the things—experiences of the senses, desires, emotions, thoughts even—what's left? Is it just emptiness? Is it a life devoid of feelings? No.

I'm reminded of the philosopher Immanuel Kant—[*addresses a particular listener*] you'll probably like this because you like philosophy. He was one of the Enlightenment philosophers a couple hundred years ago and he wanted to build ethics on a rational basis. One of the things he wrote about was how—it's the same idea that if you allow your emotions and your desires for material things to govern your actions, you're a slave to these things and you're never really free to be fully human. He would compare us to animals; animals are led by their desires, right? If they're hungry, they have to go out and eat, if they get agitated by something, if they get angry, they'll attack.

So he says, 'what is it that makes us fully human, not to be enslaved to these desires and instincts and emotions?' For him it was to be acting purely on the basis of reason, which in his mind was something that animals didn't share. Nowadays people might disagree and say, 'well, dolphins have some kind of rationality'—I don't know. But for him, anyway, he said, 'well, we have to act on the basis of reason,' and reason would lead you to ethical positions. Without going into his whole frame of thought, what I want to say is that in the Christian and Buddhist traditions that I'm familiar with—and this may be true in other traditions as well, I don't know but I would suspect there's this idea—even to be free of rationality, because rationality is predicated on ideas that we've imbibed, right? So if we're acting upon our ideas, we acting upon things that came from elsewhere and we're still not free to be wholly living for God or wholly living out of the freedom of our own spiritual life. So it has to be something even beyond rationality, beyond reason, beyond a moral system that you're living for. It's not instinct, it's not desires, it's not emotions—what is it?

I'll have to use a metaphor here and then try to describe a little bit what I see this as leading to. Say you like chocolate. And you like it so much that whenever it's presented to you you can't resist eating to it—'eating to it,' did I really say that? —you can't resist taking some and eating it. You're really attached to chocolate. But if you ate a lot of chocolate or if you're really full after a meal, somebody might offer you chocolate and you may say, 'no, I'm not interested because I'm full.' The idea of being detached not only means this lack of desire for the chocolate, it means being so full with someone else that if that desire came up you wouldn't act on it. So the desire can be there, but it doesn't seem as important as the state you're in. There's something else that's more important; there's a fullness there.

But to screw up that metaphor a little bit and go beyond, would be to say the state of detachment would be as though you were full, you had eaten a full meal and enjoyed it, and

someone offered you chocolate and you said, ‘well, I can take it or leave it—I enjoy chocolate but since I’m full I don’t have that strong a desire for it,’ yet you can still eat it and enjoy it if you chose to, without feeling like you were too full and uncomfortable. So you can still enjoy these things by choice, things that other people are attached to you can enjoy by choice—sadness, anger, grief, these things that come up when they seem appropriate you can experience them, you can go with them or not. There’s the freedom to do that.

The fullness is a fullness of a sense of peace, and contentment, and fascination, really, with life in yourself and around you. These things are so fulfilling that these other types of attachments don’t draw you the way they used to. And it’s chopping off the attachments to those things which allows you to experience this kind of contentment and this sense of drinking in the fascination of life more and more deeply. In fact, for me, becoming more detached means becoming more awake, becoming more awake to the fullness of life within yourself and around yourself. That’s what you’re becoming awake to. And it’s letting go of those things that constrict you down to a single desire or emotion or thought, that allows you to experience this greater fullness, this greater sense of contentment, of fulfillment.

So how does one become detached? I hope I made it sound like it’s a little more positive, something to look forward to, and it’s not simply, you know, denying yourself things for the sake of—because they’re supposed to be wrong or evil or something like this. Well, traditionally one of the things people have done for detachment is to simply refuse things that they would otherwise enjoy having, right? That’s the monastic tradition: you give up sex, you give up food, you fast a lot, you don’t sleep very much, you go out away from your family, leave everything behind—leave behind possessions and all that. But that was a means to an end, because there’s two sides of this.

For monastics, giving up those things was supposed to help them to come to *inner* detachment. If they were still attached within themselves, that is, if they still had these cravings for material things, for sex, for enjoyment of food, whatever it was—if they still had those strong attachments within themselves, even though they had let go of it in a physical sense, it didn’t do them any good. So it’s the inner detachment that was being aimed at.

The other side is, it was always understood that lay people could also come to inner detachment. You could live among the things of the world without being attached. Sometimes the phrase of Jesus in, I believe it’s in Matthew, where he said ‘blessed are those who are poor in spirit,’ is thought of as having that inner detachment. Even though you live among the things of the world you’re not attached to them, you’re not controlled by them. They don’t rule and govern you life. So physically refusing things is one aid to detachment, but it’s not the central thing; the central thing is this inner detachment.

For me, the real key to detachment is awareness, to be aware of the attachment, the fact of an attachment to something. The more fully aware of that attachment you are, the more you’ll be aware of the pain and suffering it causes you: the sense of craving that’s uncomfortable, the sense of lack of freedom when you’re driven to act upon these attachments, the sense of narrowing yourself down to an identity that sees yourself as a person who is defined by these attachments.

Going back to the example of chocolate, probably because this is something I like lot [laughs], steps toward the attachment to chocolate would be, first the experience of having chocolate and realizing that you enjoy it, right? Then there's the memory of the enjoyment, so that when you're presented with chocolate you say to yourself, 'that's something I enjoy, I'm a chocolate lover.' This becomes part of your identity; it starts to define who you are. Whatever it is you really like, if it starts to define your sense of identity, you've narrowed down your potential for being fully human and experiencing other aspects of life, to this one aspect of your personality. It *can* do that. So, enjoying it, habitually going to it, and then seeing yourself as a person who wants that and craves that, are the steps to becoming attached.

To become aware means first of all to become aware of these desires coming and going in your life so that you know they're transient. Secondly, it means becoming aware of forming the attachment, forming the habit of pursuing these desires, creates a strong bond that limits your freedom. When you become aware of that pull, that tug, and how strong it is, you get the sense that this is causing suffering in yourself. It's warring against some inner spirit that may say, 'I want to be free of this, I want to have the freedom not to have to partake in that every time it's presented to me,' or even if I don't partake in it not to feel such a strong craving for it that it's going to cause me a sense of suffering. And the third step is to become aware of your identity as being defined by that craving, and to realize that you can let go of that identity as well. You don't have to define yourself by that characteristic. The more you become aware of these things, the more you become detached from them.

Bringing this back to meditation, when you meditate, thoughts, desires, memories of enjoying things come to you. To be attached to one of those things means you lose your awareness of being aware of that, and then fully enter into that memory or thought or craving.

[Voice:] Say that once more.

Okay. Something comes up; let's say it's a memory of enjoying something. You're thinking about that piece of chocolate you had after dinner. You're sitting there meditating, and this memory comes up. Now, generally when you're focusing on your breath or whatever your meditation subject is, there'll be this dual consciousness of, 'okay, I'm here breathing, meditating, and yet I'm having this memory of the chocolate,' however strong it is. To become attached to that means you forget. You forget the breathing, you forget that you're sitting here meditating, and you become so immersed in this memory that something in you gets lost. There's not that dual awareness, there's not the awareness of being aware of the memory, there's simply the awareness of the memory.

So as you're meditating, you go through this repeated experience of having things come up that draw you into it, and you suddenly realize, 'no, that's drawing me in, I can pull back from that again.' You're doing the same thing that's going to lead to this detachment, which is to separate yourself a little bit and to realize that you're more than this craving, this memory, this experience. That it doesn't have to control you, it doesn't have to absorb your attention to the point where something in you gets lost, something larger, something freer—something that has more of a potential for feeling content and fulfilled and at peace.

So the practice of meditation is a practice of detachment. It's a practice of this inner detachment. The more aware you become of these things, the more aware you become of your *self* being aware of these things, the more detached you're becoming, the closer you're coming to that greater sense of yourself that's going to lead you more and more fully into this sense of freedom and fulfillment and experience of *life*.

I would use the same word as Jesus used, '*eternal life*,' meaning not simply life chronologically going on forever, but life to the fullest. Life that has—that's bottomless, that has no end to the depths of it.

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