

## Attachment as Fascination

by Alan Zundel

Detachment is held up as a spiritual ideal, an ideal that can sound rather cold and emotionally distant. People think of the opposite of detachment as attachment, but the picture can look different if you think of the opposite of detachment as fascination.

What does it mean to be fascinated by something? It means to be caught up in it, to have your interest captured by it, to become so focused on it that it shuts other things out. You can be fascinated by something of beauty and intricacy, like a piece of music, a work of art, or something in nature. You can be fascinated by the faces of people that you love—a child's face, a close relation, your intimate partner. You can even get caught up in the face of a stranger, a beautiful stranger or a person with an especially interesting face.

At the opposite pole, you can become fascinated by things that are frightening or grotesque or unusual. Rubbernecking on the freeway—people are fascinated seeing a wrecked car and even more so seeing someone who has been injured. It is not just sympathy for the victims that draws our attention, but fascination with human vulnerability and pain. We are also fascinated by people that have deformities; we try not to stare, but when we think no one is looking we take that second glance. Or somebody that is unusually tall or short or anything out of the ordinary, our attention gets pulled to them.

What people become the most fascinated by, though, is their own thoughts and feelings. And the process is similar to being fascinated by things of beauty, or things that are frightening or grotesque.

Emotions tend to be more on the grotesque side; we become fascinated by our emotions when they are what people call negative emotions; things like resentful states of mind, anxious feelings, depressed feelings—there is the tendency to become fascinated by the feeling. To other people it is just a negative state of mind you are in, but to you it's a different story. Your attention gets drawn into it and you want to immerse yourself in it: 'gee, I feel so bad' or 'gee, I'm so worried.' You become fascinated by it; you become drawn into it.

Thoughts can be negative, compounding negative emotions, or they can be thoughts that we see as beautiful and intricate, like the belief systems that we adopt. A set of religious beliefs or a philosophy of life that impresses you as very intricate and meaningful can fascinate you. It becomes so fascinating you want to tell other people about it and it bothers you when they don't want to hear about it. You know you are really fascinated by your thoughts when other people challenge them and you find yourself getting upset; you want to protect that precious belief against challenge and so the other person becomes an enemy because they threaten it.

To be fascinated by our own thoughts and emotions is a state of self hypnosis. The more fascinated we are the more deeply we are in a state of hypnosis, mesmerized by that emotion or that thought. It is so compelling, so attractive that we get stuck in it, even though thoughts and emotions are ephemeral—they come and go, they have no stable existence. The emotion eventually dissipates, your beliefs eventually change, life moves on. But we are so fascinated with thoughts and emotions that we become identified with them; we lose the awareness of the difference between who we are and what we feel or believe.

Pulling yourself out of those states, shaking your fascination with your thoughts and emotions, is the process of waking up. The ability to sense the difference between the totality of ourselves and the limited part of ourselves that is a thought or feeling is essential to awakening. The totality of who we are is much more open, open to all that is around you, all your perceptions, all your feelings, all your thoughts, without becoming caught up in them and stuck in a state of fascination. You know that fascination is losing its hold when emotions come up and you no longer feel that you have to linger in them. Or you share your thoughts and someone disagrees and you do not get upset about it; you just listen and consider what they have to say, you are not defensive about it.

So fascination is another way of describing attachment. Detachment is not a negation of life but a fuller openness to it; your focus expands rather than being narrowed down to the parade of passing mental phenomena.