

Loving Detachment
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Reading

Once the Buddha addressed his awakened followers: “My friends, I am free of all human and divine entanglements. And as you are likewise free of all human and divine entanglements, go forth into the world for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, with compassion for the world, and for the benefit, the blessing, and the happiness of gods and humans. Do not two of you go out on the same road. Teach Dharma that is good in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end. Reveal the spiritual life, complete and pure in spirit and in form.

(from the Samyutta Nikaya, translated by Gil Fronsdal and appearing in Teachings of the Buddha, edited by Jack Kornfeld)

Sermon

As many of you know, May is the month during which many Buddhists celebrate the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. So today I will talk of Buddhist teachings, in particular teachings having to do with the relationship of compassion to detachment, or non-attachment.

I will begin – oddly enough you might think – with a baseball story. True story.

Were any of you watching a couple of weeks ago when Red Sox batters hit four home runs in a row in a game against the New York Yankees? It was really something, let me tell you! And to think we were about to turn the game off when it happened!

Well, one home run is always exciting. Yet the first one that night was, if not expected, at least something you *might* expect any time Manny Ramirez steps up to the plate. Well, over the wall it went as he stood and watched – which is what he does. Then new Sox right fielder J.D. Drew came up, and a few pitches later *he* put one into the seats. Well, very exciting of course – but two home runs in a row happens now and then, and Drew was signed in part for his power.

Okay, then up comes third baseman Mike Lowell – often a clutch hitter, but not someone you associate with lots of home runs. A few pitches into the count he lofts one all the way out of the park for the third in a row. By now the fans are going nuts. We’re a little nuts at home too.

Of course we’re beginning to wonder if this can keep up – though not really expecting it to. But then, on the third pitch the next batter, catcher Jason Varitek, hits number four, this one into the monster seats above the left field wall.

Now, in case you’re not a baseball fan and you’re wondering... this doesn’t happen very much at all. The Dodgers did it last season, but the last time before that that any team in the American League had four homers in a row was 1963. It’s only happened five times... ever.

Why do I tell you all this?

Because as excited as I was... I found that I also had sympathy for the Yankee pitcher, Chase Wright – a rookie, about the same age as my own children, making only his second major league start. Oh my goodness, what must it have been like to be Chase Wright during that five minutes – what’s it like now?

So here’s what this story tells me about compassion and detachment.

If my only and all-consuming interest as a baseball fan is my home team, the Boston Red Sox, if I am totally consumed by my passion for my team, my *attachment* to my team, then I wouldn't give a hoot about the feelings of an opposing player. Four home runs in a row! That's all I would care about.

But looking in the face of that pitcher, or even just imagining his situation, dissolves and transcends that attachment – at least for a moment... For a moment it is just my human feeling for another human being – and it has nothing to do with what team he's on or what team I'm rooting for.

And you can look at this from the other direction, too. To the extent that I hold my attachment to my home team lightly (with a little bit of non-attachment), I more easily and naturally can feel compassion for an opposing player. We were watching the Red Sox play the Yankees last year when their marvelous outfielder Hideki Matsui broke his arm. As a fan, you're not rooting for the other team to get hits. But you don't want them to get hurt. So you just felt badly for him. And such a moment – and it is a moment of simple compassion, fellow feeling – transcends the competition, transcends attachment.

Okay then, easy enough when it comes to athletic competition (though not always all that easy for every fan...) – but what about more serious matters?

Well, to begin with, it is quite natural, easy in a manner of speaking (though poignantly painful at the same time of course) to feel compassion for victims of natural disasters – our hearts simply open when we see or read of people caught in the midst of drought, earthquake, tsunami, or the devastating tornado yesterday in Kansas.

But what about this: Do we feel, can we feel, compassion for the family of the latest suicide bomber in the streets of Baghdad or Kabul or Jerusalem? Perhaps we do. Perhaps we can.

But... do we feel, can we feel, compassion for the suicide bomber himself? Are we able to feel something of the depth of confusion and hate that has occupied his soul? Something of the pain he must feel with a heart that apparently is empty of compassion?

On the contrary, how understandable it would be to say there is no point to feeling compassion for someone who is intent on doing such terrible harm to others. Yet... of course fully believing that someone who is planning such a brutal act should be apprehended, imprisoned, brought to justice... perhaps even so our heart *can* open in compassion even to such as these... And perhaps it is the case that if we close our heart altogether to anyone, we have closed our heart a little to everyone, and we surely don't want that.

I'm not suggesting that any of this is easy. And, I'll repeat, I'm surely not suggesting that people who do terrible things ought not to be brought to justice. Heavens no. But, all this said, it has always seemed to me that if someone who does something terrible is at the same time also responsible for our closing our hearts – well, then we've been hurt twice over. And part of that secondary hurt is actually caused by our own attachments, attachments to our feelings of hate for example, or to our desire for revenge.

There is a story from the Buddhist tradition, much too long to share in its entirety. But the heart of it is this – there was in the time of the Buddha a man named Angulimala (which means necklace of fingers), who was terrorizing the population of the towns and villages, murdering and dismembering people, all in an effort to gain power and control.

Not surprisingly, just about everyone wanted his head... but the Buddha approached him in the spirit of friendship and compassion... and won him over. Angulimala had never been treated with such warm-heartedness. And, transformed by

the teachings of the Buddha, he soon became a monk himself – and was given a new name: Ahimsaka – the Nonviolent One.

There is much more to the story. The little I've shared makes it sound way too easy; the rest of the story addresses all the deeply-rooted emotions (and their attachments to those emotions) that people would so naturally have about this supposedly transformed murderer, and it also addresses issues of justice and forgiveness.

But the thread that runs through the whole of the story is compassion. And, to return to our theme, it is compassion *made possible by* non-attachment.

What *is* this about?

Well, at the end of the little book *The Buddha and the Terrorist*, which is a retelling of this ancient story by Satish Kumar, he puts it as well as I could hope to express it; so I will just share his words with you. This brief passage comes at the conclusion of a sort of coda to the overall story, a coda which has to do with a woman who has been helped by Ahimsaka. She asks:

“...aren't you supposed to follow the path of nonattachment?”

“Yes, we do. But it doesn't mean that we sit in meditation in the monastery all day, having no concern for the world. Nonattachment does not mean noncaring, inaction, or nonengagement. We cannot work toward the liberation of all living beings while remaining disengaged and aloof,” answered Ahimsaka.

“But then how does it differ from attachment?”

“Attachment means clinging, being tied to a person or a place or an idea. Engagement is to realize that we are all related and connected, yet we are not bound to each other. There is no possessiveness in my heart; I am not 'I,' and nothing is 'mine.' Detached from desire and craving for personal gain and gratification, we monks act from compassion, not out of attachment,” said Ahimsaka.

I suppose there you have it! So, whereas we might at first tend to think that compassion has to do with deepening attachments... to everyone... it is not so. We can be connected and engaged without being attached and possessive. We can care without clinging, without always looking for what's in it for us, and without hanging on to, being attached to the varied emotional states connected to the relationship. Indeed, our connection and caring may become all the richer and deeper – and more compassionate – as we loosen our unhealthy attachments.

You know, even our compassion for those we love the most, our family and friends, is deepened to the extent that we are not driven in our relationships by grasping or by a desire to control. Isn't it true that we love the most deeply and purely when we treasure the other for who they are, and not for how they can meet our selfish needs?

So - “Loving detachment” is simply another way of describing the fullness of compassion. And as I suggested last week, it matters, it really matters quite a bit that more of us more of the time learn to be more compassionate. It has of course always mattered. Yet if anything, in our troubled world today it is more important than ever. And if compassion sometimes seems in short supply, the good news is that it is a renewable resource! And though it can take energy to loosen our attachments and to develop and nourish our compassion, our open heart, our warm heart, no fossil fuels will be burned in the process!

Now, back to the Buddha himself before we finish. It is, after all, his birthday!

You may recall that the word “Buddha” is not a name, but a title – and it simply means “Awakened One.” Well, awakened *from* what? Awakened *to* what?

Perhaps it is simple – not easy, but simple.

Awakened *from* the clinging and grasping, the attachments of all kinds that cause so much of our suffering. Awakened *to* the reality that we are not separate selves, that in some sense our experience of a separate self is a kind of illusion, that we are part and parcel of one another – “all related and connected.”

And so, *of course* compassion. And *of course* detachment – in the sense of detachment from me and mine, the kind of detachment or nonattachment which opens us to a world of we and ours, to a world of interdependence deeply felt – again, compassion.

So that in the midst of a baseball game we can feel compassion for an opposing pitcher who is having a really bad, in fact a record-setting bad day.

So that in the midst of war we can feel compassion for a resident of Baghdad who has lost a family member every bit as deeply as we feel compassion for a citizen of Massachusetts who has lost a family member in that same war.

Not easy. People who study these things tell us that – quite understandably – we have a natural, inborn affinity for those in the circles closest to us – family, then friends and local community, then nation. So we *do* need to train ourselves, to learn, to grow toward a wider compassion – not to stop loving those closest to us, but to extend our love, our compassion. That is one of the reasons – or so it seems to me – that we have teachings like the Dharma of Buddhism or the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus... to encourage us to stretch our souls and our lives, to stretch to embrace all others, all beings with our compassion.

How do we actually do this?

Books have been written! Religions created!

But we can begin (as I will end this morning) with the simple and ancient practice from Buddhism which I shared with the children earlier (so simple, you see, that a child can do it!). We can from time to time bring one person to mind, to our heart’s imagination we might say. And simply wish that person well. It might be someone we love. Or, more challengingly, it might be someone we’re not getting along with or even harbor ill feeling toward. (If we are a Red Sox fan, it might even be a Yankee pitcher.) In any case, good exercise for the heart – and surely not unlike Christian prayers or any prayers for the well being of others. So much of this is universal teaching, just in varied dress.

Take a moment now to hold one person in your heart with compassion.....

Pema Chodron, in the book *No Time to Lose*, which our Buddhist study group is reading, says she has a friend who, when he is feeling depressed and withdrawn, will go outside to a nearby park, sit down, and simply silently wish the passersby good fortune. What a lovely exercise! What a heart-opening exercise. Loving detachment. Compassion. In precisely the spirit of the reading this morning, that we go forth, free of selfish attachment and bring happiness and goodness to the world. (And remember we don’t have to do it all – we are part of a team... a very big and beautiful team...)

The world can indeed only get better if we practice such things just a little more... and a little more... and a little more.

So may it be.

(With many thanks to Pat Bianco, who suggested this fruitful topic – having “won” the opportunity at the Merrie Market auction!)