

## *Attachment vs. Affection*

November 5, 2008

The word for clinging, *upadana*, also means to feed. The *upadana* of a tree is the soil it feeds on. The *upadana* of a fire is the fuel it clings to in order to burn. So *upadana* means food and sustenance, and also the act of taking sustenance: i.e., feeding. When we apply it to the mind, the mind's *upadana* is a place where it looks for happiness—when you feel that the life of your happiness depends on having this person, that situation: whatever it is to keep your happiness alive.

For most of us, our emotional feeding is on other people. This is the aspect of our relationships that the Buddha says leads to suffering: If our happiness feeds on things that are subject to aging, illness, and death, then our happiness is going to age, grow ill, and die as well. This is why we have to look elsewhere for our true happiness. It's why we train the mind to develop qualities inside that can provide a happiness that's more secure.

Now, this doesn't mean we don't continue to feel love, affection, and compassion for people outside; simply that we don't have to feed on them anymore, which is actually a benefit for both sides if the feeding has been a burden for both. On the one hand, the Buddha has us develop compassion for everybody. It's one of the brahma-viharas: unlimited compassion, realizing that there are people who are suffering and you'd like to do what you can to relieve their suffering. You'd also like them to act in ways that can help eliminate suffering. That's an aspect of compassion that's often missed. It's not simply a floating-around kind of wish for people to be happy. It also requires an understanding of why people are unhappy. Their unhappiness comes from their actions: maybe past actions, maybe present actions. So you want to think of them doing things that are skillful. If their past actions make it difficult to avoid physical pain right now, at least you hope they'll be able to find a way of dealing with the pain so they don't have to suffer from it. And you also wish for them to do things that will prevent future suffering as well.

There's also a more particular kind of compassion. It comes out of gratitude. The Buddha recognizes that we have special connections with other people, especially with our parents, but also with anyone who has been helpful to us in this lifetime. Those connections call for gratitude, which means that these are people to whom you want to give some special help.

You've probably heard of the passage where the Buddha says that a good person, by definition, is someone who recognizes the good that has been done for him or for her, and wants to repay it. This starts with your debt of gratitude to your parents. In the beginning, you literally fed on your mother when she was pregnant with you. You took nourishment from her blood. When you were born, you fed on her milk. And as you were a young child, your parents worked to provide you with the physical food that allowed you to survive and grow, and you continued to feed emotionally on them. As you grew older, you found other sources of emotional nourishment and took on the burden of feeding yourself, but you still have this enormous debt to your mother and father for having given you life and started you on your way.

As the Buddha said, the best way to repay that debt is not necessarily to obey your parents, because there are times when your parents have all sorts of wrongheaded and wronghearted notions. The best way to repay them, if they're stingy, is to try to find some way to influence them to be more generous. If they're not observing the precepts, try to get them to be more virtuous, to have more principles in their lives. In other words, introduce them to the practice of the Dhamma in as diplomatic a way as possible. Most parents resent their children trying to teach them, so you have to learn to do this in an indirect way. Some also resent the B-word, so you don't have to couch these teachings as Buddhist.

But you do have that special debt, and you have other debts as well. There's also a sense of affection that should go along with the debts. As the Buddha said, when a young monk ordains, he should regard his preceptor or mentor as his father. And the preceptor and mentor should regard the young monk as a son. That special connection lasts as long as both are still monks and still alive. It entails various duties in looking after each other, but more importantly it entails a sense of trust, affection, and respect.

So there's room for special affection in the practice, but the Buddha also warns that special affections can often harbor special dangers. He talks about the hatred that comes from affection, and the affection that comes from hatred. In other words, if there's somebody you love, and somebody else has been nasty to that person, you're going to hate the person who's been nasty to the person you love. Or if there's somebody you really hate, and somebody else hates that person, you're going to feel affectionate toward that person, which may bring on some unfortunate consequences.

In other words, affection is not always reliable and pure. So here you have to exercise equanimity, realizing that sometimes affection can draw you into unskillful mind states that you've got to watch out for. This is why the brahma-viharas don't contain just unlimited goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy, all of which basically come down to goodwill. Compassion is what goodwill feels when it encounters suffering. Empathetic joy is what goodwill feels when it encounters happiness. Those three are a set. But the brahma-viharas also contain equanimity, the ability to step back and simply look on a situation dispassionately. That ability should be developed to become unlimited as well. In other words, you see that there are times when your partiality toward a particular person is going to cause trouble not only for you but also for that person and other people as well. If somebody is really sick, and all you can do is get upset about the sickness, you're going to be less effective in your help. You have to remind yourself that we're all subject to aging, all subject to illness, all subject to death, all subject to separation. There's no way you can avoid this. So accept that fact, and do what you can to mitigate the suffering.

There's a passage in the Canon where King Pasenadi is visiting with the Buddha, and an aide comes up and whispers in his ear that Queen Mallika, his favorite queen, has just died. He breaks down and cries. The Buddha's way of consoling him is interesting. He reminds him, "Since when have you ever heard of someone who was born who didn't age, didn't grow ill, didn't die? We're all subject to these things." And it's amazing how taking a larger view like that can help console you. It lightens your burden to remember that you're not the only one being singled out to suffer. You may feel singled out at first, but you have to

realize that there's suffering all over the place, people dying all over the place—what?—200,000 every day. Illness is everywhere. Aging is everywhere. So when these things become apparent, both in ourselves and in our loved ones, we have to develop equanimity, realizing that this is the way things are everywhere. That spurs us to look for another source of happiness deeper inside. If we're feeding inside and don't have to feed outside, then we can be much more effective in actually being helpful to people who are suffering one way or another.

So it's important to realize that the Buddha's teaching against clinging is not a teaching against affection, or against special gratitude or special goodwill. His teaching on the unlimited quality of the brahma-viharas is not a denial that there are people to whom we owe special debts. We do owe special debts, and there are people for whom we should feel special affection. We simply have to be aware that affection and partiality have their dangers. You probably know the teaching where the Buddha says that it's hard to find anyone who hasn't been your mother, father, sister, brother, or child in some previous lifetime. What's interesting about this teaching is that he doesn't use it as a basis for universal love. After all, we know how difficult relations can be with mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers and children. Instead, this teaching is meant to encourage a sense of *samvega*, a realization of how long this wandering-on has been going on, and how meaningless affection is in the larger context of all those people over that long stretch of time.

Your special debts in this lifetime are to people who actually have been your parents this time around. If you've been a parent, your special affection does go to your children this time around. But we have to realize that there are limitations and dangers to these affections. Affection can lead to suffering. There's the case of Lady Visakha, who came to see the Buddha after a funeral for one of her grandchildren. The Buddha asked her, "Would you like to have as many grandchildren as there are people in this city?" And even though she had just been to a funeral, she said, "Oh, yes, lots and lots of grandchildren. That'd be wonderful." "But," he said, "would there be a day when you wouldn't be going to a funeral?" And she realized, well, No.

There's another story of a man coming from the funeral of his son. And the Buddha commented, "Yes, suffering does come from those who are dear." The man got upset because he felt that those who are dear bring only happiness. His affection was so strong that it blinded him to its connection to the suffering he was feeling right then and there. The problem is not so much with the people who are dear as with our need to find our happiness by feeding on people who are dear. Yet there is a way to overcome that, which is to learn how to find a deeper happiness inside, a happiness that comes from training the mind.

There's a passage where Ven. Sariputta announces to his fellow monks that he had sat down to think one day: Was there any possible change in the world that would cause him to grieve? And he had realized that there wasn't. Ananda immediately asks him, "But what if something happened to the Buddha? Wouldn't that cause you grief?" And Sariputta says, "Well, no. I'd reflect that it's a sad thing that such a wonderful person had passed away, is no longer able to help the world." And Ananda's comment is interesting. He says, "That's a sign that you have no conceit."

In other words, our grief over the loss of other people really comes down to our own sense of loss, "my" loss, what this is doing to "what I am." If we can

learn how to get away from that identification, that need to feed and lay claim to those we feed on, then we can have affection for others, pay special attention to those to whom we have special debts, and yet not suffer for it. That's why it's important to make these distinctions—the distinction between clinging and affection; the distinction between general goodwill for all and specific goodwill for people who have been good to us. If we're clear about these distinctions, we can work on expressing goodwill, feel love, and feel affection in ways that don't cause suffering.