

The Buddha's Relationship Advice

October 29, 2018

The Buddha was very mistrustful of love as a source for happiness. He noted that there are many noble things that people can do from love, but also many horrible things they can do.

There was a case where a man had lost his son. He goes to the funeral, comes back, and sees the Buddha. The Buddha asks him, "Where are you coming from?" He says, "From my son's funeral, my only son." And the Buddha says, "Yes, there's a lot of suffering that comes from those who are dear." And the man said, "Well, no, I don't agree with that. There's a lot of happiness that comes from those who are dear." Here was someone who'd just suffered a loss of that magnitude, and yet he was blind to what had happened.

So he goes off and happens to meet up with some gamblers, and he tells them the conversation. The gamblers agree with the man that only happiness comes from love.

Word of this gets to the king. This was apparently back in the early days before King Pasenadi had become a follower of the Buddha. But one of his queens Mallika had already become a follower. And so he said, "This Buddha of yours has said that those who are dear bring suffering." And she said, "Well, if that's what he says, then it must be true." He said, "Here you are, just believing everything the teacher says. Get out of my sight!"

So she has a brahman go to see the Buddha and ask him, "What did you mean when you said suffering comes from those who are dear?" So the brahman goes. And the Buddha tells him a whole series of stories about people who go crazy because they've lost a husband, lost a wife, lost a child. In one case, a young couple had just gotten married and the parents of the bride were not too happy with the son-in-law, so they brought the bride back home and were going to give her to somebody else. So the young bride sneaks out of the house, goes to see her husband, tells him what they're planning to do. He can't face the idea of living without her so he kills her and kills himself, with the idea that after they'd died they'd be together; a lot of suffering and a lot of very unskillful actions.

So the brahman goes back and tells the queen what the Buddha said. And instead of repeating exactly what the Buddha said, she goes to the king and starts talking about some of the king's children and his major queen, "Are they dear to you?" "Yes." "If anything happened to them, would you be affected by it?" He said, "It would alter my life." She said, "That's what the Buddha meant."

We live in the world where there's so much impermanence and we find somebody that we really like, that we love, that we get attached to, and there's a lot of clinging there. The affection is not what the Buddha criticizes. He criticizes the clinging, because the clinging is where the suffering is. Clinging basically means that we're feeding off of them. A large part of our happiness depends on them. In that way they become part of us, so when there's a loss, we feel that a good part of us has been lost as well.

Think of all the unskillful things we do out of the concern to maintain a relationship, fear that we're going to lose someone who's dear to us. There are cases where people will kill and steal and lie and do all kinds of unskillful things in order to maintain a relationship. And then the relationship just gets pulled out of their hands—either one side dies or else the affection dies—but then they're still left with the kamma. Kamma lasts a lot longer than affection: It can go from one life to many, many lifetimes down the line.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate, to find an alternative source of food so that we don't have to feed off of our relationships: a sense of well-being inside, a sense of being able to control our own happiness, control our own mind. Because that's what the problem is: The mind is out of control. We go grabbing for whatever we think will make us happy and we end up doing a lot of unskillful things, because we hold onto something and we find it's slipping from our fingers so we get desperate and we try to hold on even tighter or maybe grasp for something else. And because there's so much dissolution going on, we don't take the time to stop and figure out, "Well, what should I hold onto? What's skillful to hold onto?" We just grab whatever.

So we want the concentration to give ourselves a more solid basis. Even though the concentration itself is not permanent, still it's a lot steadier than most of our other clings, as the Buddha would call them. That puts us in a better position to regard our relationships with more objectivity.

When a young monk ordains, the Buddha says that he should have the same affection for his teacher that he would for his father, and the teacher should have the same affection for him that he would for a son. So there's some affection there, and it's in the affection and mutual respect that the student grows. But it's important not to turn it into clinging.

Back when I was in Thailand, there was a famous monk whose monastery I visited once, and he seemed to pay an awful lot of attention to me. I began to get the sense that he wanted me to leave Ajaan Fuang and come and stay at his monastery. And I really didn't trust him, even though he was highly regarded in general. I got back to the monastery, Ajaan Fuang yelled at me, the woman in the

kitchen yelled at me, and I said to myself, “Ah, at least I’m at home where I feel safe.”

So you want to have relationships where there is affection, there is respect, and there’s also the sense that when a relationship ends it doesn’t have a lot of ragged ends. In other words, you look back on how you treated the other person and you realize you weren’t just feeding off him or her. You offered something. You offered a gift of the relationship. That’s when relationships end well.

The Buddha lists four qualities that he said make a good relationship, and they make the relationship good while you’re having it and also when you look back on it after it’s over. There’s not a lot of regret. You left the other person with something to basically pay for whatever amount of feeding you did off the person.

The first quality is generosity—giving of things, giving of your time, giving your knowledge, giving of your forgiveness—so that you’re not totally on the receiving end.

The second quality is kind words. This doesn’t mean speaking sweetly all the time. There will be times when you have to make criticisms, but you try to do it in a way that’s timely and beneficial. In other words, it’s something that is actually helpful to the other person. You’re criticizing them for something that they can change. At the same time, you try to find the right time and place. The Buddha says there are actually times when it is advisable to say something that’s not pleasing to the other person. But if you’re showing respect for the other person by, say, taking the other person aside, showing that you don’t have contempt for the other person, then when you look back on your words that you’ve shared with the other person, there’s no reason for self-recrimination.

The third quality is genuine helpfulness. In other words, when you give a gift it’s not simply for the sake of showing off or making points. You actually try to figure out: What would be good for this person? What would be helpful? You help that person in his or her genuine aims and offer encouragement in ways that will be for that person’s long-term welfare and happiness.

And finally consistency. The way you were at the beginning of the relationship—if you treated the person fairly—you want to stay at least that fair-minded all the way through. If you’re not quite yet fair, try to become fair-minded and say that way. And be very careful about how you talk about that person behind his or her back. The things you say behind the person’s back should be at least as good as the things you say in front of the person.

When I was with Ajaan Fuang, he very rarely praised me for anything. It wasn’t until after he’d died that I found out that he’d been praising me to other people. Which, of course, means a lot more. You realize he’s not doing it to gain

favor. And when he did die, I remember seeing some of his students crying, and I didn't have that sense of loss so much. There was a sense of lacking something but the sorrow that comes from having said or done something unskillful was not there. I always felt that everything he'd done was in my best interests, and I'd always tried to respond in kind. When the inevitable end came, it came with a minimum of regret.

So as you think about your relationships, you remember: If you try to make all your happiness dependent on the other person, that's placing too big a weight on the other person. You want to be responsible for your happiness inside. This is why we meditate. When you're feeding well inside, the relationship's not so much one of feeding. You want to make it a relationship where you're giving a gift.

Because as we go through this lifetime, the Buddha said, it's very hard to meet somebody who hasn't already been our mother or father, or brother or sister, or daughter or son at some time in this long, long time. So you reflect on that: The main feature of relationships is that they end. And so, keeping in mind the fact that the relationship will end, what do you want to be able to look back on? Not so much the good times you had together, but the good things you did for the other person. Those feel really good.

As the Buddha said, if you have a really good relationship that you want to continue in the next lifetime, make sure that you both observe the precepts together. Of course, there are times when the relationship is okay, but you don't particularly want it to last beyond death: Even then you observe the precepts, so that when the relationship ends it ends well. Kamma outlasts affection. It outlasts relationships.

So train the mind so that your relationships don't get in the way of good kamma and actually can foster it. That way, the relationships are good while they last and also good in retrospect when they end.