

Cutting Off Attachment

Attachment at the time of death

At the time of death the great teachers say that many of us will be afraid of losing what we know and love, and afraid of the unknown ahead of us. Especially, we don't want to let go of this body or this life. Such attachment to our body and our life can be the source of much unhappiness and distress. Therefore, while we can, we should understand and confront our attachment, so that we are prepared when death comes.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche puts it this way: The mind that clings gets stuck to the object of attachment. When you receive praise: 'You are so intelligent', 'You speak so well', 'You understand Dharma so well', your mind gets stuck to the praise and is no longer free. Like a fly that gets stuck in a spider's web: its wings get completely wrapped up and it is very difficult to separate them from the web. Or like ants in honey. Attachment is the mind stuck to an object.

Lama Zopa quotes the Kadampa geshe whose advice was to cut off attachment to the 'eight worldly concerns': winning and losing, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, fame and disgrace. Consider the first of these, wanting to win at business and become wealthy. Having wealth is not the problem. So, what is the problem? The problem is the mind desiring and clinging to wealth – that is the problem. But if there's no attachment, no worldly concern, having or not having wealth does not become a problem.

Attachment is Suffering

The instruction from the holy mouths of the Kadampa geshe is to cut off the 'eight worldly dharmas' (eight worldly concerns) in order to be free of the attachment clinging to this life. The thought of the eight worldly concerns is the source of all obstacles and problems.

If I give up attachment, will I lose my happiness?

When you are told to give up attachment, you feel as if you are being told to sacrifice your happiness. Your attachment has been confiscated; you have been robbed of your happiness; and you are left there empty like a deflated balloon. Why do you feel like this? It is because you have not realized the shortcomings of attachment. You have not recognized that the nature of attachment is suffering. You are unable to see that there is another happiness, real happiness.

Eight Worldly Concerns (version #1)

Numbers 1 and 2: Being pleased when we have money and material possessions, and displeased when we do not have these

Numbers 3 and 4: Being pleased when we have the pleasures of this life – pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tangible objects – and displeased when we encounter unpleasant objects

Numbers 5 and 6: Being pleased when we receive praise and approval, and displeased when we receive blame, criticism or disapproval.

Numbers 7 and 8: Being pleased when we have a good name, reputation and image, and displeased when we have bad ones

Eight Worldly Concerns (version #2)

Winning and losing

Pleasure and pain

Praise and blame

Fame and disgrace

For example, consider attachment to an object such as eating good food. You label this experience 'happiness' and it appears to you as happiness, but in reality it is only a lesser level of suffering. If you keep eating, expecting your happiness to keep increasing, it doesn't, it only decreases as you feel overfull and then sick. Your happiness becomes the 'suffering of suffering'. Before you started eating you were suffering from hunger; what appeared as happiness as you began eating was a diminution of hunger. At the same time the suffering of eating was starting but you didn't notice this until you had overeaten.

Actually, by sacrificing the eight worldly concerns, by freeing your mind from attachment, there is real peace, real happiness. Seeking samsaric pleasures in dependence upon external objects is work that has no end. No matter how much you work towards that goal, it has no end. Temporal happiness, which is dependent on external objects, is in the nature of suffering. There is no way you can finish your search for temporal happiness.

Why are wealth, pleasure, praise and fame problems?

It is easy to understand how it can be a problem to be a loser and/or to live in poverty; to encounter the unpleasant and be in pain; to be blamed or criticized; and to have our reputation besmirched and to be held in disgrace. But you might not recognize acquiring lots of things, living in comfort, being praised or being famous as problems. However, they are all the same; they are all problems. The object itself is not the problem. Having wealth is not the problem. So, what is the problem? The problem is the mind desiring and clinging to wealth - that is the problem. But if there's no attachment, no worldly concern, having or not having wealth does not become a problem.

Being attached to praise

There are people who are attached to being praised and respected by others. If you ignore such a person and walk past with your nose in the air, or say just one or two words disrespectfully, something that they don't expect to hear, it causes great pain in their mind. For such a person, with so much expectation, so much clinging, it is like having an arrow shot into their heart. Suddenly anger arises strongly. Suddenly their body becomes very tense. Their face, relaxed and peaceful before, now becomes kind of terrifying - swollen and tight, with their ears and nose turning red and the veins standing out on their forehead. Suddenly the whole character of the person becomes very rough and unpleasant.

A mosquito bite

You might be sleeping comfortably one night when your sleep is disturbed by a mosquito biting you. If you have strong worldly concern, strong attachment to comfort, you will be very annoyed at being bitten by the mosquito. This one mosquito takes just a tiny, tiny drop of blood from your body. But seeing that mosquito's body filled with your blood, you are shocked. You become angry at the mosquito and are upset all night. The next day, you complain about the mosquito all day long. "I couldn't sleep for hours last night!" You are as upset as somebody who has lost a million dollars. For some people, even such a small problem becomes huge.

Changeable friends

The less attachment you have for the four desirable objects the fewer problems you will have when you meet the four undesirable objects. So, when you do not cling to the expectation that your friend will always be nice to you, always smile at you, always help you when asked, there is no hurt when your friend changes and does the opposite of what you are attached to. There is no pain in your heart.

Experiencing the four undesirable objects

How do keep your mind peaceful when problems happen? How do you protect your mind so that experiencing the four undesirable things does not disturb you? By realizing that clinging to these four desirable objects is the problem. You have to realize the shortcomings of these four desirable objects and abandon clinging to them. This is the basic psychology. The best way is to train our minds to expect the four undesirable objects rather than the four desirable ones. Expect to be criticized and disrespected. Then, when something undesirable actually happens, because we are expecting it, it doesn't come as a shock; it doesn't hurt.

If you examine well the nature of the mind that clings to material things, comfort, praise and so on, you won't find that it is a happy mind; you will see that it too is suffering. It is not the happiness you thought it was before meeting the Dharma. It is not peaceful - it is painful.

Attachment is the mind stuck to an object

The mind that clings gets stuck to the object of attachment. When you receive praise: 'you are so intelligent', 'You speak so well', 'You understand Dharma so well', your mind gets stuck to the praise and is no longer free. Like a fly that gets stuck in a spider's web: its wings get completely wrapped up and it is very difficult to separate them from the web. Or like ants in honey. Attachment is the mind stuck to an object.

Attachment is the Source of All Problems

Following attachment and not finding satisfaction is the major problem of samsara. Having cancer or an incurable virus, for example, is not the main problem. They don't continue from life to life. If you don't do something about the problem of attachment in this life, while you have a perfect human rebirth, it will continue from life to life. 'Following attachment leads only to dissatisfaction' said Lama Tsongkhapa.

The most serious disease

Following the eight worldly concerns is what brings us the diseases that scare us so much. It creates the karma for us to experience all the serious problems that a person can experience. Attachment clinging to this life is the most serious disease.

Strong attachment leads to strong anger

When there is very strong attachment, it is very easy to become angry. The stronger the clinging, the stronger the anger that arises. If you don't cling very much, you don't get so angry when someone upsets you. You might still be disturbed, but less.

Attachment destroys your meditation

When your mind is overwhelmed by attachment, completely clouded by attachment, you cannot meditate. At times when your mind is quiet and peaceful, you may have some feeling for emptiness; but when your mind is obscured by a thick fog of attachment you are unable to meditate on emptiness. And you are unable to think of the shortcomings of attachment.

Obvious examples of strong attachment and its shortcomings are alcoholics and drug addicts. Their lives become so unhappy, so uncontrolled and they damage their memory and awareness.

Disease comes from attachment

Disease comes from the dissatisfied mind of attachment to the eight worldly concerns, because dissatisfaction creates the conditions for sickness. You could then be sick for many years, with huge unwanted expenses. These might lead you to steal, and your mind becomes disturbed and might lead to a nervous breakdown. You then need to see a psychiatrist. You might have thoughts of suicide. You might be committed to an institution. But if, from the very beginning, you had kept yourself free of the eight worldly concerns, all those years of unwanted problems and expenses would not have happened. When your attachment isn't fulfilled, when you can't get what you want, this is the time of nervous breakdown and thoughts of committing suicide.

Success in business

In business, you may have success after success, which encourages you to chase the four desirable concerns even more. But one day your karma for success is exhausted and everything collapses. Someone who was wealthy yesterday, with no financial worries, today suddenly has to worry about even such a small thing as how to take care of his family. He doesn't know what to do and is unable to eat or sleep.

A great protection

Freeing yourself from attachment becomes a great protection. Cutting off clinging to an object or person means that all the other negative minds do not arise, and you don't create all those negative karmas as a result. You stop the causes of the lower realms.

The most harmful enemy

If you do not have the motivation of the eight worldly concerns, which tie you to samsara, even if somebody kills you, all you do is change to another body. Your consciousness takes another

perfect human rebirth or goes to a pure land. Your being killed is just a condition to change to another body. But if you do not practise the Dharma, even though no one kills you and you live to be a hundred, you constantly create the causes of the lower realms. And the longer you live, the more negative karma you create. Therefore, the motivation of the eight worldly concerns is more harmful than an enemy who merely kills you.

Real peace of mind

So concentrate on the real peace that you can experience immediately by freeing yourself from attachment. At the very least, for peace of mind and the happiness of this life, and to halt the accumulation of your problems, you need to control attachment.

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