

Question 35 :

Everyday I feel very sad (not depression etc) thinking about that one day I will have to leave all the good and wonderful people that I met in this life, i.e. my working colleagues, friends, best friends, family members, my partner, my children, neighbours, other people who helped me in my life, relatives, and, servants who worked for me. I think very deeply into this issue and according to Buddhism the cause of my unbearable sadness is attachment to these people and craving for them not to leave and be permanent and around me all the time, similar to be immortal. However, I realised that everything is not permanent and the answer to this problem is detachment. But the realisation of the fact that one day either I have to leave them or they have to leave me, bringing separation brings too much sadness and tears to my eyes. Although no one can change this impermanence, dissatisfaction and suffering, I am thinking why this is happening and I would assume everyone feels the same way and 'in the same boat'?. Is meditation or thinking about loving kindness is the answer? Is there any other strong Buddhist advice that you can give me to control and to tame my mind and to bring my mind to peaceful stillness and to the brain, more wisdom? *From Jane Wright*

Answer:

It is very difficult to develop detachment when attachment and love bring us so much joy. We cling to those who we love, and we don't want them to leave us. When they do, and even when we think about them leaving us, we feel anxious, sad or depressed. And yes, we are all "in the same boat"! Even those who have practiced Dharma for many years feel this way. Venerable Ananda was very sad when he knew that the Buddha was passing away. Detachment is developed gradually, by several different methods.

One way is to look deeply into the nature of attachment. It is through human relationships such as friendship, romance, and parenthood that we are able to develop virtues such as gratitude, tolerance, compassion, sacrifice and loyalty. But we can look carefully at the nature of our affection for another person. What do we most love about the person? We love the feeling when the person looks at us with affection, speaks lovingly, hugs us or does kind things for us. We love the good qualities of the person – the kindness, compassion, patience, humility, etc. Therefore we love the feeling that we experience within our own mind as prompted by what we see, hear, and touch of the other person. And we love to identify with or emulate the good qualities of the person. So we are attached to the feelings, and the good qualities, and not just the person – after all, would you be so attached if you could not ever see, hear, or feel the other person or if he lost all of his good qualities? There are many, many people everywhere, all over the world, who would love us if they got to know us, and who have many good qualities. Why don't we appreciate all those people – why just be attached to a few? We are comfortable with, and therefore cling to, the people we know, deluded by doubt that we would find such nice people elsewhere, or fearful of finding ourselves alone without someone to love. We would not cling so tightly if we did not have those doubts and fears.

Another way is to recognize the imperfections in human relationships. We are at times impatient or disappointed with the words or actions of those who we love dearly. There are disagreements and frustrations in even the best of relationships, particularly when we go through changes in life. The Buddha used a powerful technique to help a monk overcome attachment to a human relationship – his fiancée - by showing him another attraction that would give greater joy than a human relationship would give. Venerable Nanda was ordained by the Buddha just before he was to be married. He felt dissatisfied with being a monk, pining after his very beautiful would-be bride. So the Buddha showed him the celestial beings in one of the heavens, the Heaven of the 33. Nanda was so dazzled by their sweetness, purity and beauty that when questioned by the Buddha about who was more lovely, his would-be bride or the celestial beings, he said that his would-be bride was like a scalded she-monkey with her nose and ears lopped off compared to the celestial beings, that she does not count at all, there is no comparison whatever – the celestial beings are infinitely more lovely.

The Path of Purification VII 115, a famous Buddhist text, lists the heaven-worlds with their deities and states that when a person is devoted to the recollection of these deities, he becomes dearly loved by these deities, develops his faith, obtains much happiness, and is headed for a happy destiny. These deities have even more abundant divine qualities than humans have, as they developed such qualities to a great degree, and they are not troubled and distracted by worldly stress. Therefore, if and when we are able to perceive them, they may easily be more an object of our affection – and thus a source of great joy - than any of our human relationships. There are, however, higher attainments to be made on the spiritual path.

The practice of meditation gives us experiences of peace and loving-kindness, glimpses of happiness and universal love that do not involve attachment to another being. If we practice meditation diligently, we eventually derive greater happiness from it than from many worldly experiences. In the Samyutta Nikaya IV.36.19, the Buddha describes the types of worldly pleasures connected with the 5 senses, lovely forms, sounds, etc – which would encompass the wonderful people that we know, their sweet voices and the happy experiences (based on what we see, hear, touch, etc) that we have with them. The Buddha acknowledges that some may say that this is the supreme joy that beings experience, but he says that there is another kind of happiness which is more excellent and sublime, which involves secluding oneself from sensual pleasures and by meditation, entering into the first jhana, which is accompanied by thought and examination, rapture and happiness. Even higher than that happiness is the second jhana, which involves the experience of internal confidence and unification of mind, without thought and examination, and is accompanied by rapture and happiness from concentration. Even higher than that happiness is the third jhana, which involves mindful and clear comprehension, happiness with the body, and fading away of rapture. Even higher is the fourth jhana, which is beyond pleasure and pain, and involves purification by mindfulness and equanimity. There are higher states of meditation than these, also, which give even more happiness.

As we become more mindful of our experiences, becoming more aware of dissatisfaction and impermanence, and as we practice meditation, gradually we develop more and more equanimity and detachment as well as universal love and compassion, which ultimately are more satisfying than human attachments.