

## *Relationships*

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You read about the Buddha's path in books. It's all laid out in nice, logical steps: one step building, building up to another one, leading up to another one. It all makes perfect sense.

You develop virtue, you develop concentration, and then based on the concentration you develop discernment. You need the virtue for good powers of concentration, because it helps you lead a life in which there are no regrets. You don't do anything harmful to yourself; you don't do anything harmful to other people. As a result, when the time comes to settle down and get the mind still in the present moment, it's very easy.

You're not disturbed by memories of the past where you harmed this person or did something harmful to yourself. So you're neither bothered by regrets nor do you start lying to yourself with denial around the things you'd rather to cover up from yourself. When you've got a clear conscious like this, it's easy for the mind to settle down.

And it's the same with the connection between concentration and discernment: Once the mind is still, it makes sense that you see things a lot more clearly—when there's a sense of well-being that comes from within, when you can be on friendly terms with your breath. The breath comes in, the breath goes out, you stay with the breath, the mind relates well with the breath: There's a sense of well-being that comes from being with the present moment like this.

Then it's easier to deal with some of the more difficult issues that come up in the mind: things where ordinarily you tend to lie to yourself or cover things up. Once the mind is in a good mood like this—when it has a good friend in the breath—it feels stronger. It's willing to admit to itself truths about itself that it ordinarily wouldn't admit, couldn't stand to hear, couldn't stand to see. In this way, the mind gains insight that leads to release.

So it all makes sense laying it out like this. The problem is, our minds don't make sense. They don't necessarily follow easy paths like this. And our lives' don't follow sequential paths like this, either.

We can't wait until we have really perfect virtue before we're going to start working on concentration. We can't wait until our concentration is strong before using discernment to deal with certain issues, because they come up in the midst of life.

So what we do is learn how to make use of what we've got in terms of our virtue, in terms of

our concentration, and in terms of our discernment—to put them to use. We put them all to use at whatever level they are. In that way, no matter how weak they are, through exercise they get stronger

It's like the body. How do you get a strong body? You take the weak body you have and you exercise it. And through exercise, it becomes strong. In the same way, you take whatever virtue, concentration, and discernment you have, and you apply them to the problems of life as they arise.

And it's good to keep things basic. All too often, we like to head off into advanced Buddhist philosophy right away. But if it doesn't have any grounding, we tend to get lost in the abstractions.

So it's good to keep in touch with the beginnings. What are the beginnings? Well, there's one passage where the Buddha says, "Give me someone who's honest, who's no deceiver, and I will teach that person the Dhamma."

So the first quality you'll need as you practice the Dhamma is honesty. This means not only being honest with other people, but even more importantly, being honest with yourself. When difficult situations arise, difficult emotions arise, be honest with yourself about exactly what is going on.

Take the problems in relationships, and the problems when good relationships come to an end: All sorts of conflicting emotions come up at that time. And the first question is, what exactly is going on here? What are your emotions? Where do these things come from? You try to probe in.

It's not simply a matter of watching the emotion come and then watching it go, and then somehow it'll just go away on its own and not bother you anymore. It doesn't work that way. You have to probe into it; you have to ask questions.

That's the next step: learning how to ask the right questions. They basically come down to the question of what's skillful and what's not skillful in this particular cluster of emotions you have.

And that, as you carry it through, relates to the four noble truths, because the unskillful part is whatever is causing suffering. The skillful part is whatever leads you away from suffering.

So, say, when you have difficulties in a relationship, just look at what are the good parts and what are the bad parts. What are the skillful parts of your feelings about this other person, and what are the parts that cause suffering?

And remember the Buddha's analysis of suffering. Clinging to the five aggregates: That's suffering. So where is the clinging in your relationship? Where is your clinging in your thoughts about the relationship? That's what you've got to look into.

Now, we've got a problem here that in English we talk about feeling attachment for someone, and we tend to equate the attachment with the clinging. But that's not necessarily the case. When you feel strong attachment for another person, there's a whole cluster of emotions in there—and only one of them is clinging.

There's affection and that's a good thing. There's gratitude: That's a good thing. There's trust, a sense of commitment: These are all good things. But when you pile clinging on top of them, even the good things can get turned into suffering.

Once there's clinging, that leads to another part of attachment, which is emotional bias. There comes a slant in the way you look at things. So you have to learn how to take the emotion apart, and see precisely where the clinging is, because that's the suffering. That's what you've got to work on.

Now, the texts say there are four kinds of clinging. In terms of relationships, three of them are relevant. One is that you get certain sensual gratification out of the relationship. Certain desires you have are met: physical, or emotional, or mental desires, whatever they are, and you begin to feed on that gratification. That's one aspect of the clinging.

Another one is clinging to habits and practices, which are basically the habit patterns that you get into in a particular relationship. You cling to those as well. The clinging here means that you base your happiness on them. You get to the point where you really feel that you can't have any happiness without them. That's when the relationship turns into suffering; where your emotions about the relationship turn into suffering.

Then there's clinging to your sense of self. So many of us define ourselves in terms of our relationships with other people. "This person loves me; that person loves me. I can depend on this person. That person can depend on me." The *I* and the *me* get entangled in there. A lot of our good feelings about ourselves that depend on that *I* and *me* in terms of the relationship—those are the things you have to watch out for. Because these are the things that turn a relationship, even a good relationship, into suffering. When the relationship ends, for whatever the reason, that's why there's suffering that goes along with the grief.

There's that passage we mentioned this afternoon, where Ven. Sariputta talks about how he didn't see anything whose change would cause any sense of disturbance in his mind. Ven.

Ananda immediately counters with, “Well, what if there were a change in the Buddha, what if the Buddha passed away?” And Sariputta said he would think, “It’s a shame that such a great being has passed away. A lot of people have been helped by him. It’s a shame that more people can’t be helped by him. But,” he added, “I wouldn’t feel any grief.” And Ananda’s response was, “That’s a sign that there’s no conceit in you.”

This is that last kind of clinging: that sense of I, of who you are, that gets defined by the relationship. That’s what causes a lot of the grief right there. So it’s important that we be honest towards ourselves about that fact. Say, “Yup that’s there.”

That’s when you can start taking it apart. See how much you really believe in that. Because there’s so much stuff that we have in our minds that we pick up from various places, stuff we’ve never really examined to see how much we want to identify with these things. If you identify with that sense of clinging, you’re going to suffer.

If you can look at the sense of clinging until you realize that there’s nothing really there that’s worth identifying with, then you can begin to let go of the craving that led to that clinging, because you see the drawbacks that it has.

This is where you bring to bear whatever powers of concentration you have. We talked earlier about concentration means being on friendly terms with the present moment, and having a place where you can feel, settled down and be at ease. In Pali they talk about concentration as being *vihara-dhamma*, which means a home for the mind: a place where the mind can retreat, gain strength, where it can rest and gain nourishment. When you have a place like this within, then the kind of the weight you tend to put on your relationships outside begins to grow lighter.

In other words, you begin to look less and less for your happiness outside, and look more and more for it inside. When your happiness is based on the inside like this, then it doesn’t have to depend on taking anything from anyone else, or requiring that anyone else be this way, or that way. That takes a huge load off of a relationship.

When that sense of clinging is gone, then the affection, the gratitude, the commitment, the trust that make a relationship a good thing no longer cause any suffering.

So when difficult emotions arise like this, as we said, you can’t wait until your virtue and concentration are totally equal to the task, but you take whatever virtue and concentration you have and use them to support your discernment. Use your discernment to learn how to ask questions about these emotions as they come in.

The ability to ask questions about an emotion means that you can step back a little bit from it. It's not that you're denying it. It's not that you're cutting yourself off from it. It's just a matter of getting a little bit of perspective on what's going on.

Why you feel certain ways: One, be honest with yourself about how you feel. And then two, look into it, "*Why* do I feel this way? What's the logic behind this?"

We tend not to think about logic in line with our emotions, but actually they do have a logic of their own. There are reasons for why you feel certain things, and you want to probe into those reasons, to see exactly which reasons are worth abiding by and which ones are not, so that you can start seeing through the emotion: "This came from that assumption, and I don't really identify with that assumption anymore." That helps to loosen whatever painful emotion came from the assumption.

So it's a matter of, one, this ability to be honest with yourself and, two, the ability to learn how to ask the right questions about what's going on. Try to think in terms of the four noble truths. If there's suffering, what's the suffering? It's got to be the clinging. What causes the suffering? The craving. So look for the clinging, look for the craving.

And try to use whatever powers of concentration you have to give the mind the strength it needs in order to really be patient and persistent in this practice of coming to an understanding of what's going on—and particularly of why you're causing yourself unnecessary suffering. Because that's the real surprising discovery, when you work with discernment: that there are certain sufferings you just take for granted. They seem to be a part of your life, and you can't imagine living without them.

Then all of a sudden you begin to realize that they're not necessary. You don't have to suffer that way. It's just that a lot of weird assumptions have come together in such a way that they're causing suffering.

Then you see your own foolishness in allowing this to happen. This is why concentration is important: Most of us don't like to see our own foolishness—that we played along with this assumption for so long, "and part of me actually knew better, and yet I continued to play along." When you come to that realization, it's not an easy realization, but it is liberating when you realize: "I don't need to do that anymore."

So when difficult emotions come up in the practice, you can't run away from them. Learn to turn and look right at them. Often you'll be surprised that you really do have the tools you need, the weapons you need to handle them. The abilities you need are there.

We often tend to underestimate ourselves when we face these things. But if you're really determined to work things through, you'll find that the strength and the tools you need are at hand.