

Detachment

by Elizabeth J. Harris,

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Viveka and *viraaga* are the two Paali words which have been translated as "detachment." The two, however, are not synonymous. The primary meaning of *viveka* is separation, aloofness, seclusion. Often physical withdrawal is implied. The later commentarial tradition, however, identifies three forms of *viveka*: *kaaya-viveka* (physical withdrawal), *citta-viveka* (mental withdrawal), and *upadhi-viveka* (withdrawal from the roots of suffering).

Kaaya-viveka, as a chosen way of life, was not uncommon during the time of the Buddha. To withdraw from the household life, renounce possessions, and adopt a solitary mendicancy was a recognized path. The formation of the Buddhist monastic Sangha was grounded in the belief that going out from home to homelessness (*agaarasmaa anagaariya.m pabbajati*) could aid concentrated spiritual effort. Yet to equate the renunciation which the Buddha encouraged with a physical withdrawal which either punished the body or completely rejected human contact would be a mistake.

The Buddha made it clear that the detachment of a noble disciple (*ariyasaavaka*) — the detachment connected with the path — was not essentially a physical act of withdrawal, let alone austerity. *Kaaya-viveka* was valuable only if seen as a means to the inner purging and mental transformation connected with the destruction of craving. This is illustrated in the Udumbarika Siihanaada Sutta in which the Buddha claims that the asceticism of a recluse who clings to solitude could lead to pride, carelessness, attention-seeking, and

hypocrisy, if not linked to the cultivation of moral virtues and the effort to gain insight through meditation. (D Sutta No. 25)

A further insight is given in the Nivaapa Sutta, which weaves a lengthy story around the relationship of four herds of deer with a certain crop, representing sensual pleasure, sown by the hunter (Maara) for the deers' ensnaring. Both the ascetics who crave for pleasure, and those who deny themselves any enjoyment in an extreme way, are destroyed. Referring to the latter, the Buddha says:

Because their bodies were extremely emaciated, their strength and energy diminished, freedom of mind diminished; because freedom of mind diminished, they went back to the very crop sown by Maara — the material things of this world. (M I 156)

The message of the sutta is that ascetic withdrawal can reduce the mind's ability to discern. It can also lead to the repression of mental tendencies rather than to their rooting out and destruction.

The detachment of which Buddhism speaks, therefore, is not an extreme turning away from that which normally nourishes the human body. Neither is it a closing of the eyes to all beauty, as is clear from the following:

Delightful, reverend Ananda, is the Gosinga sal-wood. It is a clear moonlit night; the sal-trees are in full blossom. Methinks deva-like scents are being wafted around... (*ibid*)

This is an expression of delight uttered by Saariputta, an arahant, on meeting some fellow monks one night.

One must look away from external acts and towards the area of inner attitudes and motivation for a true understanding of the role of detachment in Buddhism. Physical withdrawal is only justified if it is linked to inner moral purification and meditation. In this light, *citta-viveka* and *upadhi-viveka* become necessary subdivisions to bring out the full implications of detachment within Buddhist spiritual

practice. *Upadhi-viveka*, as withdrawal from the roots of suffering, links up with *viraaga*, the second word used within Buddhism to denote detachment.

Viraaga literally means the absence of *raaga*: the absence of lust, desire, and craving for existence. Hence, it denotes indifference or non-attachment to the usual objects of *raaga*, such as material goods or sense pleasures. Non-attachment is an important term here if the Paali is to be meaningful to speakers of English. It is far more appropriate than "detachment" because of the negative connotations "detachment" possesses in English. *Raaga* is a close relation of *upaadaana* (grasping) which, within the causal chain binding human beings to repeated births, grows from *ta.nhaa* (craving) and results in *bhava* — continued sa.msaaaric existence. The English word "non-attachment" suggests a way of looking at both of them.

The Buddhist texts refer to four strands of grasping (*upaadaana*): grasping of sense pleasures (*kaamupaadaana*), of views (*di.t.thuupaadaana*), of rule and custom (*siilabbatupaadaana*), of doctrines of self (*attavaadupaadaana*). All of these can also be described as forms of *raaga* or desire. To destroy their power over the human psyche, attachment to them must be transformed into non-attachment. Non-attachment or non-grasping would therefore flow from the awareness that no possession, no relationship, no achievement is permanent or able to give lasting satisfaction; from the discovery that there is no self which needs to be protected, promoted, or defended; and from the realization that searching for selfish sensual gratification is pointless, since it leads only to craving and obsession. Phrases which overlap with attachment in this context and which can help to clarify its meaning are: possessiveness in relationships, defensiveness, jealousy, covetousness, acquisitiveness, and competitiveness. Through non-attachment, these are attenuated and overcome. There is nothing yet in this description which points to a lack of concern for humanity or the world. The emphasis is

rather on inner transformation so that destructive and divisive traits can be destroyed, making way for their opposites to flourish.

To take attachment to sense pleasures as an example, many suttas mention the peril involved. The person attached to sense pleasures is likened to a "wet, sappy stick" placed in water. As such a stick cannot be used to light a fire, so the one addicted to sense pleasures cannot attain the "incomparable self-awakening" (*anuttaraaya sambodhaaya*) (M I 240-42). He is one with whom Maara can do what he likes. (7. M I 173). He is like one holding a blazing torch, which must be dropped if burning and pain is to be avoided (M I 130). In fact, it is stressed that attachment to sense pleasures destroys the mind's ability to think clearly and objectively. *Viraaga*, on the other hand, is linked to the practice of mindfulness (*satipa.t.thaana*) and to seeing into the truth of things. For Buddhists, therefore, non-attachment or detachment (*viraaga*) does not mean a withdrawal from striving for truth but a movement towards seeing the true nature of things more clearly. In contrast, *saraaga* (attachment) leads to biased and false perceptions, since objects are sensed through a net of predispositions towards attraction and aversion.

Seeing the truth through non-attachment can operate both at a mundane and a higher level. At a mundane level, for instance, if greed always arises when an opportunity for gaining quick wealth is glimpsed, wealth will never be seen objectively as it really is — as transient, subject to change, and no answer to the search for happiness. Because of *raaga*, neither the consequences nor the alternatives will be appreciated. In fact, if any decision has to be made, the alternatives will not be seen clearly as long as the mind is clouded by *raaga*. Dishonesty and the manipulation of others in order to gain what is craved might result.

With reference to the higher stages of insight, *satipa.t.thaana*, *viveka*, and *viraaga* are intertwined. Found in many suttas are words

such as the following:

He (the monk) chooses some lonely spot to rest on his way — in the woods, at the foot of tree, on a hillside... and returning there after alms round, he seats himself, when his meal is done, cross-legged... (*kaaya-viveka*) (D I 67, etc).

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