

Attachment and Aversion – The Root Cause of Pain and Suffering

"This business of hozho. The way I understand it ... I'll use an example. Terrible drought, crops dead, sheep dying. Spring dried out. No water. The Hopi, or the Christian, maybe the Moslem, they pray for rain. The Navajo has the proper ceremony done to restore himself to harmony with the drought. You see what I mean. The system is designed to recognize what's beyond human power to change, and then to change the human's attitude to be content with the inevitable." - in 'Sacred Clowns' by Tony Hillerman

I want what I don't have; I don't want what I have – attachment and aversion

Many spiritual traditions, like Buddhism, tell us pain and suffering – mental, emotional, physical, spiritual and psychological – arise from attachment and aversions.

An *attachment* is an intense desire, craving, thirst, need, clinging and the like to be something I am not, do something I can't do or have something I don't have - related to, for example, health, appearance, finances, personal environment, career, relationships, personality or neediness around elements such as attention, recognition, security, love, control, ideas, beliefs and the like.

An *aversion* is an intense preoccupation with some aspect or quality about my self that I possess or another possesses that I am resisting and resenting - related to, for example, health, appearance, finances, personal environment, career, relationships, personality or neediness around elements such as attention, recognition, security, love, control, ideas, beliefs and the like.

In both cases, my attention, attention, focus and emotional and physical energy are working overtime to attract or resist. It's this incessant focus on the object of the attachment or aversion that is the root cause of our pain and suffering.

What does attachment look and feel like?

Attachment is like an addiction or hook which triggers a reaction in me: I must be, I must do or I must have (fill in the blank with your attachments) and if I can't be, do or have, then I experience some degree of pain or suffering, or if I cannot rid myself or another of the object of my aversion, pain and suffering result.

The downside of attachments is that, inevitably, your relationship to them becomes tenuous - producing stress, anger, resistance, resentment, anxiety, fear, and the like. Attachment and aversions cannot "not be" like that. It's inherent in the nature of attachment – like reaching for something beyond your grasp.

Take a moment and look at your attachments (or aversions) and reflect on how much discomfort you experience in reacting to them. You want your attachments to create a certain positive sense of reality for you and what you often find is just the opposite reality – not feeling loved, supported, smart, beautiful, healthy, wealthy, and on and on.

When your inner happiness and peace depend on your external attachments and aversions, you'll never experience an authentic inner state of peace. More often, you'll experience some flavor of consistent frustration. But, you think by increasing the intensity with which you pursue the object of your attachments or aversions, you'll experience a greater degree of happiness or inner peace. How has that approach to life honestly been working for you up to now? Honestly?

The antidote to attachment – detachment – not unattachment

"He who would be serene and pure needs but one thing, detachment." - Meister Eckhart

Freedom from pain and suffering comes through our release from attachments and aversions. Detachment means taking conscious control over our attachments so they stop controlling us.

Viewing life from a place of detachment does not mean we are *unattached* – i.e, cold, uncaring, etc. What detachment means is that we are living "inside" our Self – contained within our Self so as not to be driven by externals.

When we're detached, it's impossible for us to get "hooked" by another's' (or our own) wants, needs, emotions or feelings. We're not upset or manipulated by others, or by our own ego-created obsessions, desires and cravings. Detached, we can feel caring, empathic and compassionate towards others, and our Self, without becoming foggy or confused about how we think, feel or act. We don't get caught up in others' (or our own) stories or drama. Nor do we need others to be a certain way.

Curiously, what drives much of our unhappiness, and even insanity, is our addiction to our attachments – which, mistakenly, we feel will bring us happiness and peace. Nothing is further from the truth.

The truth is that surviving handily in this world, with our happiness and sanity intact, demands detachment, letting go from those people, places, things, and ideas (ours and others') that drain or manipulate our energies.

How do I practice detachment?

Simple, not always easy – by becoming a witness, watcher and observer of your Self. Moving as effortlessly as you can and navigating through life - at work, at home, at play and in relationship – without an ego-based agenda. We see what we see, we notice what we notice and we interact with those with whom we interact – but – with curiosity, without efforting or resisting without attachment or aversion. We observe, witness and watch without becoming emotionally involved, without judgment.

Watching your self, for example, becoming emotional around money, or appearance, or possessions, or becoming fearful around another person, or anxious in an uncomfortable or unpleasant circumstance, and being rather than emotionally reactive is the practice of detachment.

The reason watching and observing are so powerful is because when you observe yourself obsessing about the object of your attachment or aversion, your level of consciousness is heightened to the degree that you will begin to stop doing what doesn't serve you. You cannot observe and react simultaneously – it's impossible.

Detachment is not a passive state

Detachment is not a dissociative state where one is less conscious or even unconscious, in denial or passive. When detached, you are consciously aware and engaged in your experience but you are not attached to outcomes or obsessed with needing to be in control.

Detachment is not about "caving." Detachment means you take "right action" as it's called in Buddhist terms. You can be detached and be a "can-do" person at the same time. But, again, you're not attached to outcomes. You do what your heart feels is right. You move and you act. You just don't allow your ego to get caught up in any preconceived outcomes.

Detachment is not about giving up what we want. It's about not obsessing over the object toward which we direct our desires. When we detach from the object – person, place, thing, idea, etc. – we contain our energy, power and life force (instead of giving them away).

Detachment means accept the fact that life can be challenging and facing our life's challenges. When we let go of cravings, desires and attachments, we face life (even death) with equanimity - with nobility, integrity, dignity, respect, and openness to life's lessons that our challenges are presenting.

"The tighter you squeeze, the less you have." - Zen Saying

Letting go of attachments, and aversions, supports our soul to experience a clear mental state where we understand, really understand from a higher/deeper perspective, how to control our energies, with a sense of real self-love and empowerment, so our ego personality is not obsessed with (our or others') needing to do, to be, or have in a self-destructive way.

One of the ego's main beliefs is that we are separate from everyone else. The ego lives from a zero-sum, survival-of-the-fittest perspective. So, to survive, our ego is driven to nurture more and more attachments (and aversions) to people, places, things, possessions, ideas, beliefs, relationships and the like. Fearing loss (even loss of a belief, premise, idea or life itself) is a threat to the survival of our ego. From the ego's perspective, competition, and self-interest are absolutely necessary to maintain survival. And attachments feed our obsession with surviving.

In this place, contentment, cooperation, collaboration and compassion, first with our Self, and then with others, replace fear – the driver of attachment and aversion. When we let go of our attachments we enter a state of soul-filled equanimity – a state of harmony, balance and connection with our Higher Self – where we know that everything is unfolding according to a Universal or Divine plan.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

What are you attached to that causes you suffering in some way? What don't you have that you crave or what do you have that you resist?

When you sense a deep desire, craving, or attachment, do you ever consider what you may be trying to escape from?

Have you ever watched or observed yourself from "outside" yourself? What was that like? What did you see or discover about yourself?

Whom or what are you holding on to?

What do you feel you are lacking – that you need to get it from someone or something?

Attachment equals selfishness. What does that mean to you?

Holding on reflects a lack of love of self love. Would you agree? Why, why not?

Can you remember your earliest attachments or aversions when you were growing up? How did those attachments or aversions affect your experience of love, support or comfort?

(c) 2012, Peter G. Vajda, Ph.D. and True North Partnering. All rights in all media reserved.

Peter G. Vajda, Ph.D, C.P.C. is the founder of True North Partnering an Atlanta-based company that supports conscious living through coaching and facilitating. With a practice based on the dynamic intersection of mind, body, emotion and spirit, Peter's approach focuses on personal, business, relational and spiritual coaching. He is a professional speaker and published author. For more information, www.truenorthpartnering.com, or [pvajda\(at\)truenorthpartnering.com](mailto:pvajda@truenorthpartnering.com), or phone 770.804.9125. You can also follow Peter on Twitter: @petergvajda