



# Attachment

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Happiness is the heritage of the free. Freedom is the capacity to be ourselves, to extend to the frontiers of our own mysterious being and to express what we discover there. Thomas Jefferson had a profound understanding of this when he declared that the birthright of all humans is “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Without liberty, there can be no happiness. If we wish to be happy, then we must conquer that which enslaves us.

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Although there are many ways in which external circumstances restrict our freedom (lack of opportunity, abusive relationships, exploitative employers), we primarily are imprisoned by our own actions and attitudes. Unhappiness is usually caused, not by external restrictions, but by internal attachments that bind us to circumstances or thoughts that we are actually free to release. We simply have to let go. But this can be exceptionally difficult to achieve. It challenges everything we believe to be true about how the world works and our place in it.

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Why do some people suffer so profoundly from the death of a beloved family member while others grieve for a time and then move on with their lives? Why is one divorce a tragic melodrama that poisons the common ground for decades, while another evolves gracefully into friendship?

The answer lies in the nature of attachment. Anger, hatred and prolonged sadness are symptoms of an unhealthy attachment. When we are attached in this way, happiness is not possible because there is no freedom. The desire for revenge, the unending tears, the feelings of victimization—these are but failed strategies for winning our freedom from that which we think has stolen our happiness. They are destined to fail because they are directed at the wrong target. It is only by identifying and releasing the unseen attachment within ourselves that we will find our liberation.

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How do we know that we are being controlled by an attachment? It's simple. *We are unhappy.*

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There are many kinds of attachment. Some people are very attached to their *possessions*—their collections of artwork or miniature gnomes, their automobiles or CDs, their books or their photographs of the children. Some people are attached to *other people*—to their spouses, children, extended family, friends, neighbors, customers, employees. Some people are very attached to the *image* they have created in the minds of others—their status, appearance, influence or fame. And virtually all of us are attached to the *beliefs and thoughts* that pour through us all day long—our judgments, perceptions, opinions and feelings about the world around us.

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Attachment is not itself the problem. In fact, certain kinds of attachment are essential to our survival or make it possible for us to flourish. These are healthy attachments, and nature has designed a variety of reinforcement mechanisms to encourage their development. The primary attachment, of course, is between mother and child, which assures that the helpless infant will be fed. The secondary attachment between husband and wife provides stability in the home until the child has achieved a certain level of independence.

As we grow, we form attachments to friends and communities that make us feel comfortable and known. If we are not able to form these attachments, personal and business relationships can be difficult and shallow. Those who have not learned to develop healthy attachments to others may find themselves adrift and alone. So it is critical that we

cultivate attachment from the moment of birth. If we do not succeed in learning how to bond during infancy, it is unlikely that we will be able to do so later in life.

When it comes to protecting the species, nature is too smart to depend solely on a father's good intentions or a mother's sense of duty. Chemistry, however, is quite reliable. So, when a mother nurses her infant, the brain releases a hormone called oxytocin into the mother's blood stream. Oxytocin makes the mother feel peaceful, safe and content. Each time she nurses the baby, her body makes the connection between feeding and feeling happy. This is good news for the baby, especially at three in the morning when mommy would rather be sleeping.

Nature makes use of the same kind of chemical bonding when we fall in love. First it floods us with testosterone (both males and females) to stimulate generalized sexual desire. Then it excites us with dopamine and adrenoline when we are in the presence of that special someone to whom we are irresistibly attracted. Once we have successfully courted the object of our affections, the brain releases oxytocin during orgasm to keep us attached.

Anthony Walsh in The Science of Love (Prometheus Books, 1999) unromantically summarizes the body's powerful role in building relationships with the observation, "We develop a tolerance for the individual who is responsible for turning on the drugs within us." Love is, indeed, a drug.

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Love is much more than chemistry, however. A human being is a single system, which means that it constantly strives for congruence. The body, mind and emotions seek to resonate with one another. If we feel depressed, for example, then the mind supplies thoughts that explain those feelings and the body acts out the feelings (by getting tired or sick, for example). So each chemical stimulant that is produced during the attachment process has emotional and mental correlates. We release the hormones, we feel the ecstasy, we tell our friends all the logical reasons that "she's the one."

But thoughts and feelings can linger long after the chemicals have worn off. In fact, long-term marriage would be impossible if they didn't. But the same process of residual emotional bonding applies to unhealthy attachments, as well. We can stay attached to a circumstance, possession, perception or person long after it becomes obvious that this attachment is costing us our happiness.

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So why do we stay attached?

The simple answer is: Fear.

Over time, we have programmed our emotions to make an almost chemical association between the object of our attachment and our emotional well-being, or even our identity or survival. We become afraid that we cannot exist without this belief or person or thing, and it's all hands to the battle stations. When our attachment is threatened, we panic. The result is often tragic. It is estimated that 25% of all murders in America are committed by jealous lovers, jilted lovers or former spouses. [See Helen Fisher, Anatomy of Love: The Natural History of Monogamy, Adultery and Divorce (Norton, 1992)]

The perception of danger is literally at the chemical level, which is why neither the passion of erotic love nor the rage of rejection seems rational to the outside observer. To paraphrase the French philosopher Pascal, "The bloodstream has reasons which reason knows not."

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Attachment may masquerade as love, but the resemblance is strictly superficial. Jealousy is fear disguised as love. Spousal abuse is tyranny disguised as love. Prolonged grief is dependence disguised as love.

An attachment is self-serving; it wants what it wants. Love, on the other hand, serves the beloved, comforts her, even sets her free if that is what she asks. A mother who is so attached to her child that she cannot bear to see him leave the house is not expressing love, but her own neediness. A husband who threatens to harm his wife if she leaves him may insist that he loves her, but it's only his addiction to control that he loves. She is important only because she feeds his addiction.

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So here's a story about what can happen when an unhealthy attachment is threatened.

Rocky and Gabriela were divorced after nine tempestuous years of marriage. Not the kind of man to travel far from home, a decade ago he impulsively decided to go to Peru to visit his sister who was living there. He met Gabriela at a travel agency in Lima, and again, impulsively, decided to fly to Cuzco with her for the weekend. Within a few months, she had moved to Chicago. Shortly after that, they were married. We could see that there was big trouble ahead.

Rocky was an old-fashioned guy who wanted to lay down the law for his wife, just like his father. Gabriela followed no law. She was like an exotic bird that rebelled against all efforts to contain her. They fought constantly. They also prospered together. Soon they had real estate and money in the bank, but the power struggle only got worse. They had a child and, soon after, Gabriela filed for divorce and moved to Europe with their daughter. Every two months she returned to Chicago with the little girl and stayed at the Michigan Avenue condo they still owned together.

When Gabriela left, Rocky fell into a manic rage. He got into fights with strangers at seedy bars. He spent all his savings buying furniture and a car for a barmaid he barely knew. He stopped going to work and said he felt as high as a rock star. He drank all night and couldn't sleep. One day he picked a fight with the wrong guy, who knocked him unconscious with a brick to the back of his head. He threatened the staff in the emergency room when the doctor tried to sew his scalp back together. He was at war with the world.

This went on for nearly a year, but he was sure that Gabriela would come back to him. Maybe she would see what the divorce had done to him and her heart would soften again. When Gabriela returned to Chicago after Christmas, they met in my office to discuss changing the visitation schedule. Rocky started cursing her for living with a man she wasn't married to. "Once married, always married. I don't care what the law says. That's what the Bible says. You're still my wife as far as I'm concerned."

Gabriela started trembling. Her words were measured as she told Rocky that she had married the man six months before, but had been afraid to tell him. And then the trembling became so violent that she passed out. She had an inoperable brain tumor, and stress caused it to act up. Gabriela fell to the floor, and I held her in my arms, trying to bring her back.

Rocky stood up, his face filled with rage.

"Serves her right. I'm going out for a cigarette."

After she returned to Europe, his journey into despair was even worse. She was gone. He couldn't drown out that fact with beer and whiskey. He had to have it beaten out of him. As if the bar fights weren't enough, he started assaulting police officers. It wasn't a fair match. He spent days in jail cells, nursing his wounds. And then, suddenly, it was over.

"It's my way of getting therapy," he told me. "I wouldn't recommend it to anybody else, but that's the only way I could let go of her. I had to feel the pain in my body. I couldn't stand it in my head. It was driving me crazy. I couldn't sleep or eat. I just wanted to take out

my hatred on the world, to make the pain visible. So it's over. I can accept that now."

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Most of the time we deal with rejection in less dramatic ways. We become depressed and question whether we are loveable. Or we simmer and let the poison of resentment infiltrate all the chambers of our hearts. Or we judge and condemn and spread rumors. But nothing brings relief. Because we do not see that we are actually free to be happy, with or without the other. We are blinded by simple chemistry. We are going through attachment withdrawal, and no explanation or justification brings any relief. We think somebody did something to us, and that's why we are in pain. We can't believe that it is all happening right inside of us. It is the attachment that is causing the pain. And that's where our work must begin.

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Enlightenment is freedom. If we are constantly struggling against unhealthy attachments, freedom is difficult to achieve. Even if achieved, it cannot be sustained. So getting ourselves beyond the magnetic pull of unhealthy attachments is essential to achieving any form of prolonged peace.

There are three components to achieving this freedom. The first is to return to the present, and to stop trying to exist in the past or future. The second is to focus on what you must do, without regard to the outcomes. The third is to acknowledge that you are the primary cause of your own life experience.

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***Living in the Present.*** All attachment has either a future focus or a past focus. It pulls us towards something we want (but that doesn't yet exist) or something we don't want (in the past or in the future). Attachment draws us out of the present moment, which is very disorienting. As spiritual teachers have observed throughout history, the only place we ever exist is in the present. There actually is neither past nor future—only our present-time imagination of past or future events.

Most of the time we can contemplate the past or dream about the future with no ill effect. However, if we are drawn into these reveries through attachment, suffering is almost inevitable. Nostalgia, which is memory burdened by an attachment to "the way things were," is always

bittersweet. Similarly, those who live only in their dreams are inevitably disappointed.

Attachment is an internal message that we must have the desired object or happiness is not possible. This fearful belief has the power to split the soul with the force of atomic fission. If the desired object is not present, the gravitational pull of attachment abducts our emotional self and carries it into a mental realm that we call “the past” or “the future” where the object apparently resides. Except there is no such place, and nothing exists there. So we have succeeded only in alienating our emotional self by dispatching it to a place where its yearnings cannot be satisfied. This split between our living (ontological) self and our emotional self is the cause of all suffering. The more energy we devote to this futile task, the more we suffer. We end up in a twilight zone, with part of us in the present and part elsewhere, like Blanche Dubois in “A Streetcar Named Desire,” always waiting for the lover who never returns.

There is only one place where one is safe from suffering. That place is exactly where you are right now—in the present moment. Except that you do not exist in the present. You are probably off somewhere else, hoping, dreaming, regretting. In the present moment, there may be pain (the unfiltered experience of something that hurts), but there can be no suffering. In the present moment, the mind is silent. It has nothing to say. It can only observe and appreciate.

The state of being in the present moment is called “innocence.” This is the quality of taking it all in, exactly as it is, like a child does. To the innocent, life is wonderful, mysterious, alive. Sometimes we fall off the bicycle; sometimes we go flying down a hill like a rocket, squealing with delight. Sometimes the situation at work is exciting and the money comes rolling in; sometimes clients disappear, we get downsized, or our new boss doesn’t appreciate our brilliance. Either way, it’s life happening in its own unpredictable, marvelous way.

Can we be innocent in the face of loss, of betrayal, of deception, of failure? Can we face ourselves and one another without demanding some penance? Can we allow the experience to strike us as a bell is struck, and not take it personally? Can we stay with the experience until it is finished with us and not try to control it? Is it possible to experience what is happening without shifting focus from the event to our own thoughts about it? Is it possible to “be in the moment” when that moment is an extremely unpleasant one?

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***Letting Go of Outcomes.*** It is often said that maturity means having that capacity to recognize the consequences of our behavior. But

this is a two-edged sword. Innocence is a state in which we are not focused on consequences, but only on the experience itself. That means acting without regard to the outcome. This is why wise spiritual teachers have always counseled us to live—and love—without expectation. When we act without expectation, we are in the “flow” of life. Everything happens effortlessly. (Well, it always happens effortlessly. But when we are in the flow, we notice that.) Once there is an expectation, it means that the ego is in control. Life becomes a matter of what we can manipulate others to give us, or even what we can hound ourselves into doing. The pure experience itself vanishes into the night of our obsession with “what am I going to get out of this.” Flow seems to dry up.

This lesson was brought home to me in 1999 when I accompanied my friend Brother Wayne Teasdale to a meeting with the Dalai Lama in India. We were making plans for a conference in Dharamsala that involved His Holiness and a number of high profile intellectuals—very heady stuff. I was full of myself, and I guess it showed. At the end of the meeting, as we were getting ready to leave, His Holiness smiled at me and said, “Don’t worry about whether this conference will bring fame or money. Just stay focused on what you have to do. Whatever happens will be good. The rest is not important.”

I turned to Brother Wayne as we walked out. “I guess he says that to most Westerners who visit him. Right?”

Wayne laughed. “No, Brian. Just you. He meant that for you.”

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*You Are the Cause of Your Own Happiness.* Attachment means that we are at the effect of someone or something else. It defines us as dependent. What we need is outside of us. If something bad has happened, then it was caused externally. If some good is desired, an outside agency is required.

But happiness is entirely within our own control. When we are free of attachment, happiness is inevitable. It is our natural state, not something to be achieved. It’s what happens when we are ourselves. It’s just that simple.

We have all had the experience of happiness. Maybe we think of being with friends, or a loved one, or our family. Maybe it happened when we were doing something we loved, like playing a sport or taking a photograph of a laughing child. Perhaps we look back and think, “If I only was with that friend again, I would be happy.” But the happiness did not come from outside and pour into you. It came from within you and flowed out of you. You were happy because you flowed out.

Happiness is difficult to sustain because we think of such moments as accidental or fleeting or caused by others. But that is merely a lack of appreciation of the real cause of happiness. What seems to me as more true is that people who are consistently happy are those who know how to be happy all by themselves, no matter who is around. They choose to be happy. And that means not waiting to see what everybody else is doing before deciding it's OK to be happy. Happy people are self-reliant.

Self-reliance is the ideal antidote to attachment. It is the way we reclaim our lives from the world around us (and our thoughts about that world). Self-reliance frees us from blame as well as yearning. It means we are more likely to be givers than takers. And that bodes well for happiness.

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***Loving Without Attachment.*** Attachment is the ego's attempt to mimic love, since it cannot actually express love. Love does not come from the ego, but from a place beyond the ego. St. Paul tells us that love is patient, that love is not jealous. Does this sound like what usually passes for love in our culture? Love does not care about outcomes, or about having our needs met, or about being secure and comfortable. Love wants only to make someone happy. Parents know this, although even parental love is often full of attachments as well.

Once we let go of our attachments to another, we become free once again to love. It is my experience that love is, indeed, eternal. It can be covered up with layers of feelings, judgments and stories, but it cannot be extinguished, hard as we may try. The love that is born when we release our attachments to others, to the past, to our fantasies and expectations, is an extraordinary awakening of the human heart. It is the simultaneous experience of complete freedom and complete love, which is known as *bliss*.