**BUDDHISM AND RELATIONSHIP NOTES**

Buddhism emphasizes the value of what are called “The Three Jewels”: *Buddha, Dhamma* and *Sangha*. The term *Buddha* holds out the potential for awakening; not necessarily some extraordinary, transcendental state of being, but rather the direct experience of a highly refined process of awareness that isn’t burdened by self-deception or impulsive reactivity. *Dhamma* represents the process of awareness, and the ways and means to cultivate and perfect that process. *Sangha* *represents the community of people who are committed to the process of awakening and actively make best use of the dynamic energies of relationships to foster cultivating awakening*.

For many generations of people, the path of awakening was perceived as one of isolation, holed up in a forest or a cave, meditating, absent the distractions of relationship. To some extent, this perception is valid; there are many stories of ancient and contemporary contemplatives who spent/spend years in isolation in order to develop concentration to the highest levels attainable. It is also true that the vast majority of contemplative Buddhists live within intentional communities, and in those communities the interpersonal tensions can be powerful.

Regarding my own experience, the interactions between the meditation students during retreats is very intense, even when they are all practicing “Noble Silence”! I have been on many, many residential retreats, lasting from 3 days to 3 months in duration, and I can tell you that the interpersonal energy experienced during these retreats is remarkably strong. During retreats at the Insight Meditation Society, teachers have described “*vipassana vendettas*” and “*vipassana romances*”. These lighthearted descriptions represent the tendency for those participating in the retreat to project old wounds or resentments onto others, or to build idealized renditions of others, either romantic fantasies or imagining that the other person is the “perfect yogi”, (most often people who they’ve never met and never will get to know).

Because we are inherently social creatures, and have been since even before we were *homo sapiens sapiens,* we do not function as well in isolation. The social networks of family, friends, coworkers, are actually essential for developing a sense of self, what we commonly call an *ego*. Because we are social animals, we are born with the capacity for empathy and connectedness; it is part of the way the brain is structured. We typically call this process *love*.

Despite our inherent connectedness, one of the primary distortions that our human psyche is subjected to is the misperception that we are isolated; there is a “me”, and what remains is “not me”. The “me” primarily consists of a series of thought-moments that are fabricated through the language structure of nouns, which differentiate “things” in the world. These things aren’t necessarily material—for example, there is “my pride” as well as “my shame”—“my pleasure” as well as “my pain”. In either case, the “my” wants pleasure or pride as something that must be acquired, and pain and shame as something to be avoided. Quite often, the self-other distinction is experienced in relationships, especially when love is involved. The love can be in the context of family dynamics, romantic attachments, and the ability to cooperate in the neighborhood and the workplace.

Another unfortunate consequence of language is the misperception of love as quantifiable, that is, love is a thing which can be gained or lost, and relationships involve a form of bartering, “trading” for love in the relationship market. This means that there are winners and losers, and that love is a transaction and many relationships of all sorts founder due to “keeping score”. “I’m going to dole out X amount of love to someone, and they need to return my investment to my satisfaction; in turn, others must love me in the way I have scripted the exchange. If the transaction doesn’t turn out the way I imagine it should, I’m diminished, somehow less than!” If the exchange is not providing a sufficient “return on investment”, the love turns to hate. In either case, the person is idealizing themselves or the other as “all good” or “all bad”.

This process begins in early infancy. When we’re born, the separation between self and others is undifferentiated, that is, the relationship experience for the infant is entirely based on emotional tone. Before the brain is mature enough to develop language and meaningful associations of memory, humans are empathic, that is, highly sensitive to vocal tones and facial expressions. Infants ride on a support of feelings. This is similar to the way Buddhism describes feelings as being on a continuum, from quite pleasurable, through mildly delightful, neutral, mildly unpleasant and quite painful. We “feel” our way through relationships. For the parent (or any adult providing care for the infant), the feeling tone is overlaid with associations to the adult’s experience when he or she was an infant, entirely dependent on the adult care providers. Adults also have the advantage of the meaning making capacity of language. However, the emotional undertones of the associations of the words are often overlooked or discounted.

When the people who provide physical and emotional contact with the infant are consistently caring and sufficiently sensitive to the child’s needs, the language that is learned by the child about the relationship experience is appropriately reflective of love, of security and connectedness. When the providers are inconsistent and/or hurtful in regards to the child’s needs, the language that develops becomes emotionally toxic, developing what in psychological terms is considered “attachment trauma”. This means that the interactions are painful, and the “language of love” becomes distorted, organized around feelings of emotional isolation and, quite often, shame, or even guilt. The result is a feeling of isolation, of being misunderstood or of, at the least, confused expectations in relationships.

When the infant cries because of a dirty diaper, or even out of a sense of isolation, the response of the adult teaches the child something about themselves and relationships. For example, when the adult responds with soothing words and behaviors, this builds a series of memories that the child builds a sense of self around. When the adult responds harshly, the child becomes fearful when the language is loud and angry, or the handling of the baby is rough and painful. This also builds a series of memories for future reference. When the adult doesn’t respond at all, another set of memories are organized that creates the belief that he or she is isolated, left alone in their discomfort.

As the child matures and the store of the meanings of words begins to grow, the child then has an opportunity to “make sense” of the behaviors of others, and this moves life to another level of relationship. The toddler or pre-school child is still deeply aware of their emotions and of those important to him or her. When an angry parent enters the room, the child is very aware of the anger, but not the cause, *unless the parent can explain their mood in ways the child can understand*. In contemporary psychological terms, the parent helps the child develop a coherent sense of ego and confidence in the ability to negotiate needs in relationships. If the parent or adult doesn’t explain, or “spills” their harsh mood onto the child, then the child will often make sense out of the adult behavior with self-blame, shame or guilt. In this way the child “takes in” a self-association of memories reinforcing doubt, wrongness and confusion about how to be in relationship. One of the things I tell my clients who have unfortunately grown up in a dysfunctional family system is that “We are expected to act as if and believe that nonsense is completely reasonable!”

One of the most valuable contributions of Buddhist principles and practices is the provision of ways and means to cultivate clear awareness of what emerges into the mind. Additionally, part of Buddhist wisdom includes the intentional cultivation of benevolent intentions and actions. Contemporary neuroscientific research demonstrates that mindfulness and lovingkindness practices actually change the structure of the brain in measurable and beneficial ways. This is of particular relevance in regard to relationships.

When my wife and I married, I had been a practicing Buddhist for 6 years, and my commitment to my spiritual practice was reflected in what I announced to our friends during the wedding. I said “I want to practice loving Paula in ways that can support loving everyone I meet!” That commitment remains for me, 27 years later. The practice I’m talking about is the repeated, mindful intention to channel the connecting energy we call love routinely during the day. I get to practice more frequently and deeply with her, with the intention of generally applying this to all my other relationships. I attribute this commitment and whatever ability I may have to manifest it to my Buddhist principles and practices.

**WHAT CAN BUDDHISM OFFER TO REDUCE THE DISTRESS AND CONFUSION REGARDING RELATIONSHIPS?**

The more my meditation practice matures, the more I value the importance of relationships for spiritual growth. Here is a quote from the Buddha:

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was living among the Sakyans. Now there is a Sakyan town named Sakkara. There Ven. Ananda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, "This is half of the holy life, lord: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie."……."Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & comrades, he can be expected to develop & pursue the noble eightfold path.

Upaddha Sutta: Half (of the Holy Life) SN 45.2 translated by Thanissaro

The “admirable friendship” in the quote is the Pali term kalyana mitta, often translated as spiritual friend. A spiritual friend is one who adheres to the principles and practices of the Noble Eightfold Path. Traditionally, this means that the relationship is that between a student and qualified teacher. There are contemporary teachers, such as those at Spirit Rock in California and the Insight Meditation Community Of Washington, who encourage conscious relationship practices through small facilitated groups.

What characteristics might constitute a spiritually informed relationship? In this regard, here are some suggestions from a Buddhist view regarding “Right Relationship”:

* A spiritual friend is committed to practicing Right Speech (including “Right Listening”)
* A spiritual friend is committed to regular meditation practice, both mindfulness and lovingkindness
* A spiritual friend is committed to compassionate support of spiritual growth for self and others
* A spiritual friend is trustworthy and accessible
* A spiritual friend will not reveal or take advantage of a confidential disclosure
* A spiritual friend is committed to reading about and understanding Buddhist concepts

A key component of Buddhist practice is acting intentionally, informed by clear awareness of the internal and external conditions emerging in the moment, and guiding subsequent behavior through benevolent intention. The way to acquire and perfect these capabilities depends upon training the mind and heart with regular meditation practice.