



Being together...
Meditation circle, Alto Paraiso, 2006

Awakening to Sanity (letter 6)

Taking good care of our relationships

Dear friend,

Some of you were wondering whom I meant with „well-intentioned spiritual practitioners” in my first letter. Well, these are all those who sincerely wish awakening for themselves and for all others and then engage themselves on the path of practice giving top priority to the path of Awakening. It includes practitioners just entering on the path of practice as well as practitioners doing long years of intensive practice, for example in long term retreats.

Some also wondered what I meant in the first letter with avoiding our “relationship to friends, family, surroundings and our body becoming dysfunctional”. This question merits a careful response. Let me try a short answer:

Some practitioners, while completely engaging in their spiritual path, neglect their friendships, thinking that these are not important – some even become unwilling and unable to cultivate and maintain deep friendship. In a response to his friend, servant and companion Ananda the Buddha made this famous statement: “Ananda, friendship is not only half the dharma but the whole dharma.” So let us have a closer look at how friendships are an important part of the path of awakening.

We hear in traditional teachings that we should not be attached to friends and family. Some of us have taken this to the extreme of turning their back to their families, becoming insensitive to the needs of their parents, brothers and sisters. This creates unnecessary suffering not only to the family members but it has the potential to completely block one’s own spiritual evolution. In order to evolve we have to feel inner peace and love in relation to our family. The Buddha suggested extending the love we feel for our parents to all sentient beings, considering them as our mothers of previous lives. This definitely does not mean to feel less care for our family members. So let us reconsider what kind of relationship with our family members would be helpful for all.

In the same way, while engaging in intensive spiritual practice, some feel that their social or political environment does not need their attention. They feel largely unconcerned by the way our society develops (calling it “samsara”) and become reluctant to engage in any form of social or political activity. When the time comes that we need society (hospitals, transportation systems, education, old age care etc.), then actually we come like beggars with empty hands and ask for help. What have we done all these years as a group and as individuals to maintain these positive conditions for life and practice that we found when we started? So let us think how we can actively contribute to positive developments in our society without getting enmeshed in ego-centred concerns and activities.

The same holds true for our relationship with the natural environment. We meditate repeatedly on our precious human existence as the very basis of spiritual practice. But will there be enough drinking water and good quality food for future generations? Are we doing what we can to preserve these precious conditions for the next generations? Some might think that the ecological movement is just an expression of being attached to nature. They should consider that living in nature, eating healthy food, drinking good water, touching the earth with feet and hands, and living with animals were just normal conditions of life in the past that did not need extra mentioning. Now things are changing; for some people it has been a long time since their feet or hands touched the earth and since they got wet in the rain...

This leads me over to consider our relationship with the body. When we hear about past yogis, their bodies needed to be strong, since they lived in wild places, and even life in the towns or monasteries was physically much more demanding than nowadays. Of course they all fell sick at times and often they died much earlier than us because medicine had not developed as today. But physical hardship was built into their lives which kept them more vigorous which was in turn beneficial to their meditation. As a medical doctor I see practitioners getting weaker over the years of their practice, I see some of them over-eating and getting overweight with avoidable consequences for health, others become thin and weak. I am not addressing the unavoidable changes due to our basic human condition and the aging process; I am not talking about the difficulties of living with our individual physical constitution; I am concerned by the avoidable damage done to our body and mind by an imbalanced life with inappropriate food and lack of physical exercise. So, let us each consider what would be a good “middle way” to keep our body and mind vigorous without straying into attachments and fears.

In order to have a healthy body it is necessary that the subtle energies circulate well, and there are different ways to reach this result. For some it is possible to have the subtle energies circulate freely just through the depth of their inner relaxation, cultivating a mind of non-clinging; but for most people it is necessary to add a certain amount of physical activity to their spiritual path and to understand it as an integral part of it.

Finally, one reader requested me to give more precise indications on how one can avoid lopsidedness in one's approach saying that the more concrete these indications were, the more helpful it would be. Well, I do not share this view. The only thing truly helpful in the long run is to really listen to one's own, personal experience and wisdom, and to constantly adapt one's own "middle way" to changing life situations. We have to feel by ourselves what kind of food is good for us; in the process we might also find out that occasional junk food is not so bad when eaten with joy... We have to feel for ourselves when we actually need physical exercise, what kind, and how much of it. At some point in our life it might be helpful to do some weight-lifting or to do jogging while at other times it is more helpful to do Chi-Gong or just take a walk. There is no recipe good for all people and even no recipe good for me at all times. I have to constantly adjust my behaviour to the needs of the moment. So, please listen to your own wisdom and be sensitive to the needs of your body-mind. That is part and parcel of the path to awakening: awakening to the needs of the situation. Before this point is not integrated, more precise indications will not really be helpful.

All the best, enjoy it!

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