

Prem Yatra Volume 1

Chapter 5

Non-attachment

by Swami Kripalu

Copyright Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health and used with permission. These materials are available for the personal and devotional use of yoga practitioners. They are not to be posted elsewhere on the web, distributed to others, or used for commercial or other purposes without written permission.

Non-attachment and Attachment

Anecdote: The old man and the mango tree

Non-attachment Comes Gradually

Anecdote: The squirrel and the bridge

Anecdote: The nonattached yogi Bhatrighari

Anecdote: The long-haired saint

Anecdote: The mad saint

Anecdote: The laborer and the three stones

20 July 1977

Wednesday, 6:15 a.m.

Kripalu Yoga Retreat

Summit Station, PA

Non-attachment and Attachment

In my last two discourses I presented thoughts on non-violence and truth. Today I will express some thoughts on non-attachment, or aparigraha. Attachment and non-attachment are antonyms. The Sanskrit "parigraha" means "to store or accumulate with strong attachment," "to cling firmly to," or "to fasten completely to." Since the prefix "a" means "not," "aparigraha," therefore, has the opposite meaning: "to firmly give up" and "not to accumulate or hoard."

I will discuss non-attachment as it pertains to the needs of three types of spiritual seekers: ordinary, intermediate, and ideal. A moderate degree of non-attachment can be attained by an intermediate seeker; true non-attachment can be attained only by the ideal seeker. This highest seeker is looking only for liberation, and his sole desire is to cling to the feet of the Lord. He therefore firmly renounces his attachment to the illusory world. However, since he still desires liberation, he remains attached to non-attachment! Because one can practice sadhana only according to one's capacity, seekers beginning their spiritual journey must start from a state of high attachment and gradually travel in the direction of non-attachment.

Anecdote: The old man and the mango tree

The concept of public welfare or social service differs from that of non-attachment. Social service in the truest sense can be performed only by the greatest masters who have taken the vow of non-attachment. The average person can perform little true social service, but his service can at least be considered the start of non-attachment.

There is a story I'd like to recount about a young man named Kumaril. Kumaril had a garden in the open courtyard of his home. One day, as he entered the garden, he saw his elderly uncle, Padmakant, busy at work. As Kumaril came closer, he saw that his uncle was energetically planting seedlings. It was obvious that Padmakant, even at the age of ninety, loved to work. Kumaril was impressed by his uncle's industriousness.

"Uncle," Kumaril said respectfully, "what are you planting?"

Padmakant stopped working and looked up at Kumaril, smiling. "My son," he said, "I'm planting mango trees."

Seeing about fifteen small mango plants, Kumaril asked, "You're planting so many?"

"There are only fifteen," Padmakant remarked.

"Don't you think that fifteen are too many for this garden?" Kumaril inquired.

"No, it's all right," Padmakant said. "There's no other place to plant them."

"They will bear lots of mangoes," Kumaril added as a compliment to his uncle.

"Thank you," Padmakant replied. "May that thought come true."

"But uncle," Kumaril said as he began to laugh, "you are ninety years old! When will these mango trees bear fruit?"

"In twelve years," Padmakant answered.

"But you may leave your body before then; why are you doing all this work?"

"Son, I am sure that I will be home with God before these mango trees bear fruit," said Padmakant. "But I am planting these trees for others, not for myself. For ninety years, I have eaten mangoes from trees planted by other people. Now I want to plant some mango trees so that others may eat from trees I have planted."

Kumaril observed non-attachment in his uncle's feelings and began to understand that one who gathers for himself is a worldly person, while one who gathers for others has renounced his worldly attachments.

Non-attachment Comes Gradually

When a schoolteacher solves a math problem on the blackboard, does he solve it for himself? No, he solves it for his students. Non-attachment grows whenever we give knowledge or perform any selfless action. I love to teach very much. Even the ancient seers of India continued teaching after they had become fully liberated. They did not teach because they were attached to the scriptures. But why, then, did they teach? They were not actually performing any actions in the usual sense. Their actions were actually a form of inaction.

Any action which is not motivated by selfish desire is actually considered a form of inaction. For example, any action which is performed for the love of God or the public welfare, dedicated to Brahma, or spontaneously inspired by the Lord is "action in in-action" and the best of all forms of non-attachment.

We may use any action to acquire happiness either for ourselves or for others. When we perform actions for others, however, we receive greater joy. This heightened joy is not simply joy in the usual sense; it is, in fact, the grace of the Lord.

A person begins to recognize his own individual existence a few years after birth. At the moment he begins to distinguish between "yours" and "mine," he plants the roots of attachment. Even if he had unlimited power and could accumulate everything he ever wanted, several large cities could not hold it all! With all our attachments, if someone approached us and asked us to consider practicing non-attachment, we would scorn his suggestion.

It is as difficult to move from attachment to non-attachment as it is to move from the earth to the sky. Non-attachment simply cannot be achieved in a single bound; only a gradual, step-by-step ascent is possible. As we are more and more able to absorb a principle, our behavior changes gradually, and our personal effort becomes easier. If a thousand pounds of grain were piled in front of us, do you think we could eat it all in one day? Of course not, however, if we had one hundred years to live, we could eat twenty piles that big. A person should practice non-attachment as best he can, whether he is a worldly person or a renunciate.

Anecdote: The squirrel and the bridge

In the ancient allegory of the Ramayan, when Lord Ram received the news from courageous Hanuman that Sita had been kidnapped by Ravan, the king of Lanka, and that she was being kept in Ashoka Vana, he immediately decided to invade Lanka.

Ram's army of monkeys came to the ocean and at once began building a bridge to cross it. A squirrel living nearby watched the huge army of monkeys arriving. She observed them for awhile and soon discovered that there was one very special man among them. Each morning the entire army would pay their respects to him by bowing down; afterwards, they would begin their daily task of building the bridge. One day, the squirrel received the audience of that great man; she developed a feeling in her heart of deep love and felt a desire to serve him. Since the bridge building seemed an act of service to this great man, she willingly joined in the task.

The squirrel very carefully observed how the monkeys were constructing the bridge. Before the monkeys moved each of the large rocks needed for the bridge, they would chant the name of Ram and the rock would begin to float on the water. Because she did not have the strength to lift the huge rocks, the squirrel was sad; yet, her strong desire to serve gave birth to an idea. She went close to the bridge and happily began rolling in the sand on the seashore. Each time she performed this action, sand would stick to her fur. Each time she would place all the sand between the large rocks on the bridge. She could make twenty or thirty trips with sand in the same amount of time that it took a monkey to place one rock on the bridge. When the monkeys saw her loving, eager service, they were all so moved that they forgot the difficulty of their own labor and hurried to bring the rocks to the bridge. The tiny squirrel had soon inspired the entire army to work more efficiently.

This story illustrates two qualities of those who love: 1) only those who truly love themselves can perceive true love, and 2) lovers see more love in others than in themselves. Thus, the monkeys felt that the squirrel had deeper devotion for Ram than they did. They perceived her true love and received more joy from observing her devotion than from the devotion in their own hearts. The strength of one's devotion will determine whether it manifests partially or totally. True devotion, however, is always total, no matter where it is displayed.

At sunset, and the monkeys stopped their work. Night came, and the entire army of monkeys bowed to Lord Ram and sat in front of him. Many of the monkeys were eager to talk about the squirrel's loving service, but they sat silently and looked at the courageous Hanuman for permission to speak. The squirrel was also in silent attendance. Hiding herself at the feet of Hanuman so that no one could see her, she gazed continuously and rapturously at Lord Ram. Naturally, the wise Hanuman knew what she was up to but acted as if nothing was happening.

"Lord, " said one monkey eagerly, "today a tiny squirrel destroyed the sense of ego in our devotion to you. We were carrying huge rocks, and she was carrying sand. She continually rolled in the sand on the seashore so that sand stuck to her; she brought the sand to the bridge and placed it between the large stones. In the time we took to bring one rock, she had brought twenty or thirty loads of sand. We experienced boundless joy today at the sight of her loving service."

After hearing this tale, Lord Ram expressed his happiness at the squirrel's service. Suddenly, Hanuman gently picked up the squirrel and lovingly placed her at the feet of the Lord. All the monkeys shouted with joy. The gracious Lord stroked her tiny body. His fingers left impressions on her fur; it was as if the unseen grace of the Lord had become visible.

Like the squirrel, we are all tiny seekers. Even if we cannot attain enough non-attachment to carry big boulders, we will definitely progress if we carry a bit of sand. Start by awakening devotion to yoga. Actually, devotion to yoga is devotion to Ram, and devotion to Ram is devotion to yoga.

We are born with attachment, so naturally we want to accumulate things. Now that we have accumulated so much, we have a list of countless attachments in our memory. Under these circumstances, from what door will the poor idea of non-attachment enter our mind? Fortunately, non-attachment is extremely patient and tolerant. It has been standing outside the door of our mind for many lifetimes. It will enter whenever we call it, and then the dawn of knowledge, devotion, and yoga will break.

Anecdote: The nonattached yogi Bhatrihari

When a spiritual seeker's only aim is to attain the Supreme Being, non-attachment in its truest form is accomplished spontaneously without any special efforts. Just as any traveler who is heading west is naturally going away from the east, any seeker who is heading toward liberation is naturally moving away from wordly illusion. When seekers desiring liberation begin yoga sadhana, any previous impressions of attachment remaining in their minds, however few, begin to manifest and create a little disturbance. But the seeker frees himself from them through the power of discrimination, which increases daily as his mind and body purify. The more his love for the Lord increases, the more his love for worldly illusions decreases.

Once upon a time, in ancient India, there was a very valiant king named Bhatrihari. Even today he is regarded as one of the best Sanskrit poets and yogis, and his kingdom, Ujjayini, remains a place of pilgrimage. After he had renounced his throne, Bhatrihari practiced yoga sadhana for a long time and finally achieved samadhi. The great yogis who have achieved this union with God truly personify the practice of non-attachment. Some of them do not even feel the need to wear clothes. Their non-attachment has blossomed to such an extent that they can detach their consciousness from their body and mind and reside solely in the soul.

Once upon a time, the great yogi Bhatrihari came to a cemetery while traveling. When he sat down to rest under a canopy of trees, he suddenly became aware that the loincloth he was wearing, which was made of bark, was torn in several places. "This should be sewn," he thought. So he stood up and searched around until he found two thorns. He used one thorn to make a hole in the end of the other. But when he tried to thread his crude needle with fiber from the bark of a tree, he was unable to see well enough in the fast -approaching twilight.

At the same moment, Lord Shiva was traveling across the sky with Mother Parvati. While trying to thread the needle, Bhatrihari was chanting, "Om namah Shivaya, Om namah Shivaya, Om namah Shivaya." It was his usual practice to chant thus while performing any task. The words of the chant fell upon the ears of Mother Parvati, and she looked down and spotted Bhatrihari. Mother Parvati was a perfect devotee of Lord Shiva, and she loved Shiva's devotees as much as she loved Shiva himself. For this reason, she desired to meet Bhatrihari.

The omniscient Lord Shiva immediately knew her desire. Mother Parvati humbly said, "My Lord, one of your devotees is sitting alone under a tree. If you will kindly come down with me, I would like to meet him."

"He is not worth meeting," replied Lord Shiva.

"But he is one of your perfect devotees," exclaimed Mother Parvati with surprise. "How can you say he's not worth meeting?"

Both of them landed on the earth and stood behind Bhatrihari; but Mother Parvati wanted to face him.

Lord Shiva whispered softly into Mother Parvati's ear, "Say whatever you want to him."

"Bhatrihari, my son," she said, "I am Parvati, your mother. I have come down here with your father, Lord Shiva, to meet you. We are both standing behind you."

Bhatrihari neither replied nor turned his head; he simply kept on sewing.

Mother Parvati found this behavior strange, as well as rude. She rebuked him saying, "It was my wish to come down to earth just to meet you, yet you won't even turn to look at me."

"Don't talk so much!" replied Bhatrihari. "Have you grown so old that you don't remember anything?"

Bhatrihari's every word was filled with tender love for the mother; this pleased her heart fully. "It's true that I have grown old," said Mother Parvati. "But I don't believe what you say about my not remembering anything."

"You will believe it when you hear what I am about to say," said Bhatrihari. "So listen. Aren't you everywhere? You are in front of me; you are behind me; you are above and beneath me. You are everywhere. You are in my heart, my sight, and my speech. So tell me, how can I believe your statement that you are standing behind me? I can even see you in the hole in this thorn and in the fiber of this bark. Why should I turn around when you are right here in front of me?"

Mother Parvati's heart opened with love. She suddenly understood Lord Shiva's statement that Bhatrihari was not worth meeting. "My son," she said with affection, "I am very pleased with you. Ask any boon you want."

"You are talking nonsense again," Bhatrihari said with indifference. He didn't even turn around as he spoke. "OK, if you insist on granting a boon, take this thorn and thread it for me. How can I disobey your order?"

Mother Parvati threaded the thorn with the fiber and then expressed her sadness. "Don't you want anything from me?" she asked.

"Just go away and don't bother me," said Bhatrihari. "The fact that I have attained you is the greatest boon I can ever have. I don't believe that a greater boon exists in this world. You are boons, and boons are you. What happiness can I possibly receive from any other boon?"

Now, that kind of non-attachment is the non-attachment experienced by the great yogis.

Anecdote: The long-haired saint

The story I will now relate is about a saint of medium caliber. Even saints come in different qualities. This saint, however, was the best of the medium caliber saints and practiced a high level of renunciation. He never stayed anywhere for more than two or three days, nor did he ever choose the direction of his travel. He simply moved wherever his feet took him.

One morning, Laturia Maharaj was walking on a road. He gave no thought at all to where he was headed. The wind was blowing fiercely against his back, and his long hair kept blowing in his face. He had to repeatedly brush his hair away from his face with his hands, but to no avail.

Finally, he reached the limit of his patience. He abruptly turned around and faced the strong wind with fire in his eyes, but the wind ignored him. He began to walk again, and after another unsuccessful bout with trying to keep his hair out of his face, he turned around a second time; but the wind ignored his threatening gaze again. Exasperated, he stopped again and muttered to himself, "This silly wind is causing mischief today. I will have to straighten it out or it will continue to cause problems."

So, Laturia Maharaj turned around and started to walk directly into the wind. With a triumphant smile on his face, he said, "Hello, my friend! Now do your mischief!" The wind now blew his hair behind him, away from his face! So ends the story of Laturia Maharaj, the long-haired saint.

Anecdote: The mad saint

One day, a renunciate saint came to a large city. He noticed that a concrete road had been built beside a dusty dirt road. An old, broken bamboo basket lay beside the dirt road; he picked it up and began filling it with dirt and emptying it onto the concrete road. After a few hours, he had a huge mound of dirt on the concrete road.

Anyone watching his actions would have considered him really crazy; and crazy he was. But his madness was from practicing yoga rather than from mental disorder. He was suffering from the madness of love and devotion. He was a yoga seeker, but he had been led astray.

In yoga sadhana it is absolutely essential to have the guidance of a Sadguru who is adept at yoga. If a seeker practices yoga sadhana without this guidance, at some point in his sadhana he becomes crazy with love and leaves the sadhana. However, since this madness is very different from mental disorder, the seeker's typical behavior appears very saintly. We receive a glimpse of his saintly personality in his usual speech and conduct.

Later that afternoon, the renunciate saint finished making an enormous pile of dirt right in the middle of the concrete road. Then, he sat in the lotus position on top of the pile as if he had worked all these hours just to sit there like this. Just then, the king's procession came down the same road. Usually, the roads on which the king's procession traveled were decided in advance so that the state officers could prepare the way. But today the king had suddenly changed his mind and had taken this new road.

As the king's attendants rode ahead to clear the road, they saw the large pile of dirt in the middle of the road with an apparently crazy person sitting on top. Since they could not possibly clear the way in time for the king to pass, the only thing they could do was ask the "mad person" sitting there to move. The chief of the horsemen looked at the "mad person" and concluded he was a saint. Since everyone knew that the king was religious and never ridiculed any saint, the chief horseman approached the saint and humbly said, "The king is coming."

The saint gazed indifferently at the attendant. "Who?" he yawned.

"The king of this city." replied the horseman.

The saint continued to appear unimpressed. "The king is coming? So let him come. There is enough room for him to pass."

"But he is the king," the horseman persisted. "He should not have to suffer the humiliation of squeezing past one of his subjects. You should get up and move."

"Me get up? Why should I get up?" quibbled the saint. "If there's a king coming, then I am entitled to remain here, since I am an emperor! There's plenty of room for him to pass by."

It was not possible to move the saint from the pile of dirt without using force. Yet, the king had previously ordered that nobody should be harassed during his processions. The horseman returned to the

king and explained: "Your Highness! There is a saint sitting on top of a pile of dirt in the middle of the road. When I told him to get up, he said, "I am an emperor. The king has plenty of room to pass if he wants."

The king said with a smile, "All right, we will pass by."

The procession continued. When they came to the saint, the king halted the procession and came down from atop his elephant. Approaching the saint, he offered pranams and humbly asked, "Are you an emperor?"

"Yes," replied the saint. "Let there be no doubt about it"

"What's the difference between a king and an emperor?" the king asked.

"A king is a prisoner of a small or a large state," the saint said. "He is not free to leave his state or his palace and live in another state. He cannot travel alone. Twenty-five to fifty people have to carry him from one place to another.

"I am an emperor. I can move about in any state whenever I want unaccompanied by anyone."

The king was extremely pleased with the saint's reply. He had no further questions for the saint, but he continued the discussion for the pure joy of hearing the saint's remarks. "A king has vast wealth," said the king. "You are an emperor. You must have even more wealth."

"A king is a prisoner; thus, he is unhappy," explained the saint. "Only one who is unhappy accumulates wealth. Only one who has expenses needs wealth. I don't have any expenses, so I don't need any money. I do not hoard or store anything either. An emperor is someone who has no possessions and is unattached to possessions. No one in the world is wealthier than he is."

The king enjoyed this satsang very much. He said with a laugh, "Surely, you must have a large kingdom, and if so, naturally, you must have a large army."

"Army?" the saint retorted with a frown. "Why an army? Only the person who has enemies needs an army. I don't have any enemies. Why should I need an army?"

The king was speechless; he bowed in respect to the saint.

"Keep your bows," said the saint. "They are useless to me."

The king left feeling very pleased and happy. He had received much food for thought. The saint closed his eyes and resumed his meditation while sitting atop the pile of dirt.

How can a king impress someone who wants nothing? This degree of non-attachment belongs only to saints; worldly people can be impressed by anybody: kings, aristocrats, ordinary people, and even paupers. They must progress gradually toward non-attachment as much as they are able.

Anecdote: The laborer and the three stones

A rich man was building a temple on the summit of a high mountain. He needed to have three large stones carried up the mountainside. After deciding how much he would pay for the labor, the rich man gave the task to a certain laborer. The laborer was strong, and he eagerly started up the mountain carrying all three stones at once. After climbing for a while, however, he became tired and felt the need to lighten his load. He left one stone on a ledge and continued climbing with the two remaining stones. However, after climbing for a distance, he felt the need to lighten his load even more. So, he left the second stone on another ledge. After that, his load was much lighter and within his carrying capacity. He was able to successfully complete his task.