

FALL 2005: Marriage and Attachment

QUESTION: I'm considering getting married but I'm concerned about how this might conflict with my practice (she is not a Buddhist). How can you come to terms with attachment and ultimately renounce it, AND be married? I'm confused. Please help if you can.

NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY: If you were to choose not to get married, do you think that would do away with the question of attachment? There are charming stories about monks being attached to their one bowl or the color of their robe. Some of us are quite attached to our teachers. One can even be attached to the concept of renunciation. As you can see, whatever form we choose, it's not so easy. We are adepts at clinging. Attachment is the problem, not the object of our attachment. Sometimes people try to deal with the suffering of attachment by avoiding commitment. This is called fear, not liberation. In this case, the point is not to let go of your partner but of the suffering that arises because of wrong understanding.

Being in an intimate relationship can be a wonderful invitation to discern the difference between attachment and love. In intimate and committed relationships, we can see the ways in which we basically think the other person should be like us. We may see the ways in which we secretly-or not so secretly-assume that the other person is there only to serve us. We have the opportunity to see the ways in which our love for that person has strings attached to it. And from this recognition, we can learn about selflessness and unconditional love. This selfless love can then be extended to all other beings, including those with whom we have no personal connection. All of this is in the realm of practice. And sometimes it is very hard practice.

The fact that your partner is not a Buddhist is of little importance, unless you hold this against her. It would only be a problem if she objects to the path you have chosen and does not want you to practice. Otherwise, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, what matters is how kind you are to one another. Sometimes practitioners say that their non-Buddhist partner is kinder and wiser than they are.

If you decide to get married, be wholehearted and committed in working within the form of marriage so that it becomes a practice and thus a chance to investigate the nature of suffering and liberation. The ways that we find ourselves attached become the very ground of practice. Instead of seeing the conflicts that inevitably arise between two people as inherent problems, we see that these conflicts bring our habits and tendencies into the light of awareness-and only in seeing is there the chance to let go.