

Releasing Attachments

Many years ago, when I was just beginning to open myself to the mysteries of life, a friend guided me through a short, but extremely powerful, meditation. It went something like this: “You have a house, but you are not your house.... You have a car, but you are not your car.... You have a job, but you are not your job.... You have a wife, but you are not your wife.... You have children, but you are not your children.... You have a body, but you are not your body.... You have emotions, but you are not your emotions.... You have thoughts, but you are not your thoughts.... What are you?”

I still remember the staggering impact each successive statement had, as she bit-by-bit whittled away at my identity. She paused after each statement, leaving me to grapple with the implications. I *did* think I was those things. I had based my identity on each of them. At the end, when she asked what I was, I experienced myself floating in a whirl of stars and empty space. It was beautiful, but disconcerting. I didn't understand that she was revealing my attachments. It took quite a few years to understand that, and even more to begin to release them.

According to Patanjali, whose teachings laid the foundation for many spiritual traditions, “Attachment is that which follows identification with pleasurable experiences—when we expect joy from outside things we become attached to those things. Aversion (the negative side of attachment) is that which follows identification

with painful experiences.” It is our identification with things that causes the attachment and aversion...and not things themselves. That’s a very important distinction. You don’t have to escape to a cave, eliminate people or things from your life, or withhold your love and caring to release your attachments. Instead, you only need to let go of your mental identification with those people and things.

Two things make it challenging to let go of attachments. First, the people and things around us seem so central, essential, and inherent to our lives. They may even appear to exercise power over us. It’s extremely hard to believe that the ties that bind us to them actually come from our side, but they do.

Let’s take an example. Say, for instance, you meet a person and you “fall in love.” He or she had no power over you before, right? If you hadn’t “fallen in love,” that person would have no power over you in the future either. You give the person that power when you identify yourself with them—when you become attached. Then it matters whether he or she loves you in return, is kind and accepting, and stays or leaves.

That leads directly to the second reason why it’s so hard to let go of attachment. Attachment causes you to treat that person as if he or she were an extension of yourself. Falling in love feels great, but having someone you love leave is painful. That makes it very tempting to try to control or manipulate the outcome. I use this relationship

example because this is such a common and familiar situation. We can attach ourselves to anything (our appearance, our home, our job, our beliefs, etc.)...and we do.

There are many alternative approaches to releasing attachments. In the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Satchidananda outlines the traditional Eastern practice that has guided seekers for millennia. John Randolph Price offers a more contemporary, Westernized approach in his book, *Spiritual Philosophy for the New World*. His 60-day program requires you to surrender all of your mental identifications (body, emotions, mind, family, friends, bank account, debt, bills, possessions, fears, needs, wants, desires, judgments, resentments, jealousy, hates, etc.) in preparation for offering your service in the world.

Out of necessity, I discovered my own approach to releasing attachments. Years ago, while walking in the desert, I was shocked when I visualized everyone I had harmed or mistreated rushing toward me from every direction. I was overwhelmed with sadness and shame, and I knew I somehow had to make amends. When I got home, I explained my predicament to an intuitive friend. He told me about a simple release process he had been shown. I was skeptical, but desperate enough to try the process. That was the single most important thing I had ever done in my life.

Over the years, I've modified the process to include new things I've learned. I still use the process myself—often—and many of my friends and therapy clients have applied it with equal success. Now, I want to pass that process on to you. You can do

this process on your own, but if you have trouble with any of the steps, you can enlist the help of a counselor. I'm going to present the steps as you would use them to release your attachments to the people in your life, but you can use exactly the same basic process to release your attachment to objects, thoughts, beliefs, etc.

Two critical conditions must be present in order for this, or any other, release process to succeed: First, you must be willing to acknowledge that an attachment exists in your life. Second, you must sincerely intend to completely draw back your attachment.

Seven Step Attachment Release Process

Step 1: Create a list

The first step is to create a list of the people in your life to whom you are attached. This is usually a result of unresolved emotional experiences. You may feel either that you harmed them in some way, or that they have harmed or caused you pain. Sit down with a pad of paper and write down the names that quickly come to mind. Then, carry the list with you for a week and add any additional names that occur to you. If you question whether someone belongs on the list, include their name.

Step 2: Identify all feelings

Next, write the name of each person you identified on your list at the top of a separate sheet of paper. List of all of the feelings you feel (or felt) toward each person—both positive and negative. Jot down the feelings one after the other, in the order they come to mind. Don't rehash the past events or old stories. Instead, use the format "I feel (felt)...because..." (e.g., I feel hurt because you lied to me.). That will help keep you focused primarily on your own feelings. Carry these lists with you for several days and add any new feelings that come to mind.

Step 3: Bring the person to you using imagery

Set aside an hour alone in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Bring one of the people on your list to mind using imagery. (Start with someone easy.) Don't go back in history. Bring the person to you in the present. If you're good at imagery, it will be easy for you to visualize the person. However, it isn't necessary that you actually see the person as long as you imagine that the person's essence is there with you.

Step 4: Express all feelings

Express all of the feelings you wrote on your list to the person. Speak to the person's essence (rather than to his or her limited personality) and state the feelings with the intention that the person hear and understand you. Once you are in the person's presence, new feelings may arise. Express those feelings, too.

Step 5: Recognize limitations

From your current vantage point in life, look back on that person at the time the unresolved event occurred. Recognize his or her limitations at that time. Realize that the person did the best he or she could then—given that person's limitations. Forgive the person—not for the hurtful action—but for having the limitations that caused them to act in a hurtful way.

Then, again from your current vantage point, look back at the person you were when the event occurred. Recognize and acknowledge your own limitations at that time. Realize that you, too, did the best you could—given your own limitations—and forgive yourself.

Step 6: Draw back the attachment

This is the most critical step of the entire process. Draw back the energy that you extend to maintain your hold on the person. Once again, you can use imagery to accomplish this. You can imagine drawing back chains, ropes, rays of light, a breath; whatever image best represents the energy you extend. Finally, tell the person that you are releasing them to live their own life, have their own feelings, make their own choices, and even to stay or go as they choose.

Step 7: Thank and bless the person

Once you successfully draw back the attachment, it usually feels quite natural to thank the person for the part he or she has played in your life. Send the person away with a blessing that they reach their highest potential. If the person is no longer in your life, take this opportunity to say goodbye.

Conclusion

Until you arrive at the point where you constantly abide in the Self—free from all attachments—attachments are likely to be a recurring part of your life. Attachments are like creeping vines: They can grow back. Even after you release a person or an object you must be vigilant to not attach in the same way again. Also, it's possible that when you do a release you may not be aware of some aspect of the attachment. That doesn't mean that your original release didn't work. It only means that you need to apply the release to the new aspect. It's a good idea to check regularly for new or missed attachments to the most important people and things in your life.

When you complete the attachment release process successfully, it feels like an enormous burden has been lifted from your shoulders. You will feel the difference. You will discover that you have a much easier time staying present and it will be easier to hear guidance of intuition. Ironically, we spend much of our time chasing after external fulfillment and happiness when all we have to do is to pull back our attachments to find what we seek. You are already that.