

Attachment and Non-Attachment: Attachment Theory and Buddhism

Nobo Komagata

insi2.org

First written: September 4, 2009; Last revised: October 29, 2010

Abstract

While attachment is crucial in attachment theory, *non*-attachment is valued in Buddhism. Is there any contradiction between these two? For example, would it be absurd to pursue both attachment and non-attachment, as can be seen in the practice of mindful parenting? Since both attachment theory and Buddhism explore the essence of well-being, it would be useful to identify the connection between them. This essay discusses relevant notions and points out that there is no contradiction between attachment theory and Buddhism with respect to attachment-related ideas. The discussion also leads to a hypothesis: All the roads to well-being are consistent.

Introduction

As discussed in so many books, essays, talks, and other forms of human expressions, well-being is one of the most important aspects of our lives. Among many facets of well-being lie relationships and suffering. Every one of us must have experienced a variety of feelings concerning relationships. According to attachment theory, our experience is profoundly affected by the first few years of our relationships with our parents/caregivers. The attachment to one's caregiver is said to affect relationships later in her life as well as the view of her life, which can be more positive or negative. At the same time, every one of us must also have experienced highs and lows in her life. According to Buddhist teachings, all suffering comes from attachment to things, people, ideas, etc. Even pleasure can lead to suffering when people are attached to it. In order to end suffering, we are told to pursue non-attachment.

The question here is how “attachment” as discussed in attachment theory and “non-attachment” as discussed in Buddhism are related. Some doubt “any meaningful relationship” (Kirkpatrick, 2005). In addition, while much has been said about “non-attachment” in Buddhist writing, most of these do not discuss the connection between attachment theory and Buddhism. A small number of relevant articles are not very helpful either. For example, after a lengthy technical discussion, Ghose (2004) concludes that “one needs both attachment and detachment in a loving relationship.” Now, if the term has the same or similar meaning, attachment theory and Buddhist teachings appear to be contradictory. Then, we would be forced to discount the importance of at least one of the two notions. Naturally, such a contradiction would be a problem for, e.g., parents who pursue the fruits of both attachment theory and Buddhist teachings, as in mindful parenting. Or, if one is familiar with either attachment theory or Buddhist teachings, she might feel that the other is not worthwhile pursuing. If one is unfamiliar with both of these, the situation would be even worse. We can easily get confused and misled. As will be discussed later, even a psychologist who wrote a book discussing both attachment theory and Buddhism suffers from inadequate understanding of these notions.

In this essay, I review both attachment theory and Buddhist teachings with respect to the notions of attachment and non-attachment (as well as another term, detachment), and conclude that these terms are indeed related but there is *no* contradiction between these approaches. In fact, I point out that through these notions, both attachment theory and Buddhist teachings point to the same direction, with some broader implications. This leads to a hypothesis: All the roads to well-being are consistent. Finally, I apply the discussion to mindful parenting.

I became aware of both attachment theory and Buddhism (mainly Theravada Buddhism) through my personal experience of parenting, including reading (both the popular and technical literature) and non-religious practice of Vipassana/insight meditation. Although I checked a fair number of relevant books and articles, I did not even attempt to do complete literature search. However, I still hope that this essay conveys the essence and substance with readability and clarity.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, pioneered by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, concerns the quality of the child-caregiver relationship (e.g., see an excellent summary of an earlier stage of the field by Karen, 1994). In this context, the term “attachment” refers to an innate desire to form an affectional tie with one or more caregivers. Note that in this essay, we use the terms “caregiver” and “parent” interchangeably. Since young children cannot live without the help of some caregiver, virtually all children are attached to a small number of caregivers. However, in a severe case of maternal deprivation, e.g., orphans in institutions of poor quality, it is possible that a child be attached to absolutely nobody. Such a child would initially protest, then despair, and eventually become completely detached (or non-attached). Thus, much of what we normally discuss in connection to attachment theory is not attachment vs. non-attachment/detachment; rather, the focus is on the pattern of attachment, which can be identified by a simple laboratory test called the Strange Situation for infants at the age of one.

First, attachment can be classified into two attachment patterns: organized and disorganized. If the parent is threatening and/or abusing, the child would develop fear of her parent, while she is still attached to the parent. This leads to disorganized attachment. Children of this type generally develop a state of confusion because the same parent is the source of threat and comfort at the same time. When an infant with disorganized attachment is in distress, she often shows contradictory behaviors, such as freezing (not being able to judge whether to approach or to run away).

Organized attachment is further classified as secure or insecure. An infant with secure attachment would resist and cry when she is separated from her parent but will return to being happy after reunion. Their parent responds to her physical and, more importantly, emotional needs in a timely manner, at an appropriate level, and with consistency. Insecure attachment can be classified into two attachment patterns: avoidant and ambivalent. An infant with avoidant attachment would almost ignore her parent upon departure and return. Their parent would be ignoring, rejecting, and/or controlling. An infant with ambivalent attachment would be clingy and angry at her parent. Their parent would be inconsistent.

Although the above patterns are described for one year olds, analogous/related qualities tend to persist throughout their lives. In fact, there is another test called the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), which can often identify the attachment pattern of an adult corresponding to her infant attachment pattern. Furthermore, parents of a certain attachment pattern (identified by AAI) tend to raise their own children with the same attachment pattern. In general, people with secure attachment would have better relationships later in their lives and are considered to have more accurate, objective, and positive view of their lives.

One point that will be important later in this essay is about bereavement. One might think that secure attachment is problematic when the attachment figure is no longer available, for example, due to death. However, it turns out that people with secure attachment are more resilient when such a situation occurs. People with secure attachment internalize and carry their virtual attachment figures with them for the rest of their lives. This way, even when these attachment figures are no longer *physically* available, they can behave as if they were available *virtually*. Analogously, people with secure attachment are better able to deal with solitude. On the other hand, people with insecure attachment tend to have more difficulty as the grief would linger on. While people with ambivalent attachment are often excessively emotional, those with avoidant attachment would try to contain and ignore their emotions beyond a reasonable level.

Resilience to hardship can also be extended to the situation facing one's own death (e.g., Slide 45 of Shaver, 2006, discussing Pema Chödrön's book). Note that one's life may be terminated for a variety of reasons at any moment. For most of us, death is a difficult process and is a cause of great distress. Then, the process would naturally invoke attachment behaviors. Thus, whether or not one is securely attached would make a big difference.

From the concise review of attachment theory above, we can say that secure attachment is a desirable state of mind for both children and adults. In contrast, disorganized attachment would be considered

pathological and it would be very difficult for the child to develop normally afterwards. However, parenting styles that would lead to any organized attachment (secure, avoidant, or ambivalent) are still considered “good enough” (George and Solomon, 1999); these attachment patterns may have their own niche especially in the complex modern society. So, the level of desirability may be a matter of degree.

Buddhist Teachings

One of the most important topic in Buddhism is about “suffering,” translated from a Pali (a language used at the time of the Buddha) word *dukkha*. Unfortunately, there always is a problem with translation and the terms used in Buddhist teachings are no exception. The meaning of *dukkha* is actually broader than suffering, also covering pain, sorrow, misery, dissatisfaction, as well as all sorts of issues associated with materials, sensations, relationships, ideas, etc. Thus, it is essential that when we use the word “suffering” in this essay, we actually refer to the meaning associated with the original word *dukkha*. Now, if we have to choose one main goal of Buddhism, it must be the end of suffering. Buddhists view that suffering is caused by craving for or thirst (*tanha*) of as well as clinging or attachment (*upadana*) to a variety of things, including materials, sensations, ideas, etc., i.e., the components associated with suffering as mentioned above. The distinction between craving and clinging/attachment is subtle. Craving is when a desire gets excessive; clinging is when one cannot let go of the desire. In Buddhism, craving is said to cause clinging. Then, craving is viewed as conditioned in our minds and evoked automatically; this is the source of suffering. However, Buddhists teach that suffering can end when craving disappears, leading to a state of enlightenment. They also teach the path to the end of suffering, a collection of practical advice including types of daily activities and meditation. This is the main point of Buddhism, called the Four Noble Truths (more details in, e.g., Rahula, 1974) summarized below:

1. The nature of suffering [unskillful/wholesome effect]
2. The cause of suffering [unskillful/wholesome cause]
3. The end of suffering [skillful/wholesome effect]
4. The path leading to the end of suffering [skillful/wholesome cause]

Although the term “attachment” in Buddhism most directly refers to clinging (*upadana*), it is closely associated to craving (*tanha*). Thus, when we discuss the end of suffering through eliminating craving and thus clinging, we often use the term “non-attachment” or “detachment.” Note that this essay mainly uses the term craving, possibly covering the meaning of clinging as well.

One might have heard that Buddhism discourages all sorts of desires. However, this is misleading. Desire and craving (for the desire) should be distinguished (as emphasized by, e.g., Moffitt, 2008). A desire is all right as long as we recognize it and still do not crave for it. Then, we could deal with desires wisely. In fact, it would be very unhealthy to *suppress* desires. An example would be useful. Here is my version of the well-known “monkey trap story”: A monkey sees a banana behind a glass window of a store, where there is a hole large enough for his hand to go through. Craving for it, the monkey reaches the banana through the hole. But once he grasps the banana, his fist is too large to pull out of the hole. Although the monkey can certainly let go of the banana, he would not do it and is thus trapped with the

banana. If the monkey recognizes the desire for the banana but does not develop craving or clinging, he does not need to be trapped.

Even non-Buddhists can see that craving is problematic, especially when they observe greed and obsession as craving for materials and other forms of possession. However, it is entirely another story to be able to eliminate craving. For this, Buddhists have been using mindfulness meditation (also called insight meditation). Note that Buddhists practice, in addition to mindfulness meditation, concentration meditation, which is also found in other traditions. While mindfulness meditation has also been used by non-Buddhists, Buddhism has the longest recorded history of integrating it within their philosophy/psychology/practice. Since mindfulness meditation itself is not at all religious and can be practiced by anybody, it has been adopted by physicians/psychiatrists, psychologists, educators, etc. with positive effects (reviewed in, e.g., Siegel, 2007).

People often misunderstand the Buddhist use of “non-attachment” and mistake that Buddhism is anti-relationships, anti-passion, and/or anti-love. Quite the contrary (e.g., Copeland, 2007). For example, Buddhism is clearly *for* loving-kindness (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) and not denouncing relationships. However, loving-kindness pursued by Buddhists is considered “unconditional” love and not the kind of love based on sensual pleasure. “Love” in an ordinary sense, especially coupled with sensual pleasure, can be conditional. That is, one might “love” only when she/he feels good or is “loved” by someone else. This type of love is not loving-kindness (*metta*) and not positively viewed in Buddhism because the mental state is conditioned by craving for a certain state expected by the person. It will lead to suffering.

Unconditional love is different and is sometimes associated with the kind of love offered by a mother to her child. However, this description can still be misleading, because according to attachment theory, mothers exhibit different types of behaviors with their children. For example, mothers who are themselves insecurely attached tend to behave more selfishly than those who are securely attached. Real unconditional love taught by Buddhists must be devoid of all conditioned behaviors and mental states, including controlling through punishments and rewards. Among the parenting approaches, Alfie Kohn’s *Unconditional Parenting* (Kohn, 2005) seems to come close to it. Some other parenting books with Buddhist influence (Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn, 1997; Naphthali, 2003) point to the same direction.

Attachment, Non-Attachment, and Detachment

From the discussion above and also elsewhere (Nichtern, 2009), it must be clear that we need to use the terms “attachment” and “non-attachment” carefully. When we use the word “attachment” in connection to attachment theory, we generally refer to *secure* attachment as a more desirable state than *insecure* attachment. When a person is securely attached, she has a more accurate, objective, and positive view of her parents/caregivers but does *not cling* to them, even when they are not physically available. It is not the contrast between attachment and non-attachment, since virtually every child is attached to some caregiver. With respect to attachment theory, there is no need to use the term “non-attachment.”

On the other hand, the word “attachment” based on Buddhist teachings, is associated with the idea of *craving* for (also *clinging* to and *obsession* with) materials, relationships, ideas, etc. In this sense, “non-attachment,” the absence of craving, is a desirable state (as correctly pointed out by Vogel, 2008). But it certainly is *not* the same thing as not loving. To refer to this point, we henceforth use the term “non-craving” instead of “non-attachment.” Although the term “detachment” is being used synonymously with “non-attachment” in this context, it seems misleading because non-craving promotes neither forceful *detachment* from someone/something nor a state of *separation*.

Before proceeding, let us observe an example of misusing the terms; even a research psychologist is no exception. For example, Haidt (2006) discusses both attachment theory and Buddhism in his highly readable book. He writes that cutting off all attachments is a mistake and then writes “attachments bring pain, but they also bring our greatest joys.” By now, it must be clear how he confuses the word “attachment.” His criticism of Buddhist philosophy is based on his misunderstanding. We can instead rephrase his points as follows: It would certainly be a mistake to cut off relationships and love, but cutting off all craving would be a completely different thing (according to Buddhism, it can even lead to enlightenment). Craving brings pain while relationships and love *can* bring our greatest joys. Once we notice this point, his “Happiness Hypothesis” seems astray, although the readers in general (e.g., Amazon reviews) do not seem to have picked up this problem.

At this point, we compare secure attachment in attachment theory and non-craving in Buddhism. I point out that these are consistent. Here are two points in support of the idea.

First, as described earlier, people with secure attachment are able to cope with bereavement better than those with insecure attachment. This is because the former do not cling to dead people, in a good sense, as much as the latter. More generally, people with secure attachment tend to develop better relationships later in life, mainly because they can interact with people more naturally depending on each situation and do not cling to their own expectations. People with secure attachment also tend to have their children securely attached to them for the same reason. Thus, the entire situation appears close to the notion of non-craving in Buddhism. That is, in connection to both attachment theory and Buddhism, non-craving would lead to well-being.

Second, a new kind of connection between attachment theory and Buddhism has been evolving thanks to the recent development in neuroscience. For example, the same areas of the brain, including the middle prefrontal cortex, has been shown to be activated and even strengthened in both people with secure attachment and experienced mindfulness meditators (Siegel, 2007). In this connection, Siegel proposes that internal attunement (cf. attunement with other people) is the key to both secure attachment and mindfulness. This suggests that secure attachment and non-craving through mindfulness share certain brain functions. Although this is just one aspect, future research may discover more along the same line.

So, secure attachment in attachment theory and non-craving in Buddhism seem to be consistent. As long as the terms are used carefully, we can avoid the confusion of premature and incorrect conclusion

that the use of the term “attachment” is contradictory between attachment theory and Buddhist teachings.

Broader Connection between Attachment Theory and Buddhism

We started our inquiry into the connection between attachment theory and Buddhism around the term “attachment.” However, there are more to the connection. First, it is possible to consider secure attachment as the “middle way” as discussed in Buddhist teachings. When the Buddha was a prince, the legend is that he had every kind of pleasure, from palaces for different seasons and continuous entertainment to a beautiful wife and the prospect as a future king. Still, he was not satisfied. He eventually left his family at the palace and became an ascetic, pursuing the truth through extreme self-discipline including fasting and grueling meditation. This did not satisfy him either. Later, he became enlightened through the middle way, avoiding the both extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. Although I believe that the notion of middle way is deeper than just avoiding extremes, it still tells that neither extremes are good. In this sense, non-craving (“non-attachment”) can be seen as the middle way between the extremes, excessive craving/clinging (“attachment”) and suppression of desires (“detachment”) (referring to the use of the terms by Yong via Dillon, 2008). Now, secure attachment can also be seen as the middle way in the following sense. While people with avoidant attachment tend to minimize the emotional reaction to distress, people with ambivalent attachment tend to crave for and maximize it (e.g., Slide 46 of Shaver, 2006). The former suppress their desire to be with and the latter literally cling to their attachment figures. In between these extremes, people with secure attachment tend to respond naturally and appropriately to emotional distress, without overreaction. Zimberoff and Hartman (2002), citing Holmes’ earlier work, also discusses the balance between the two extremes between intimacy (as pursued by people with ambivalent attachment) and autonomy (as pursued by those with avoidant attachment).

Second, one of the three characteristics of existence in Buddhism, along with suffering, is “impermanence” (*anicca*), i.e., the idea that whatever rises will fall. People with secure attachment appear to embody the principle of impermanence. In a sense, contrary to the label “secure attachment,” they seem to know that nothing is secure. For example, as described earlier, secure attachment is an antidote to bereavement. Or, secure attachment may actually be the ability to recognize insecurity and let it go. Furthermore, people with secure attachment can deal with relationships more naturally than those with insecure attachment. This is because they perceive relationships, which are indeed impermanent, more objectively. On the other hand, people with insecure attachment would react differently. For example people with ambivalent attachment would cling to people/things as if they were available *permanently*. People with avoidant attachment would suppress their desire for people/things as if they were permanently unavailable. The following quote from Goldstein and Kornfield (1987) seems to refer to both impermanence in Buddhism and secure attachment in attachment theory:

Things are insecure or unsatisfactory in the sense that something that is always changing is incapable of giving us a lasting sense of completion or fulfillment. When we see this deeply in ourselves, it also begins to decondition the strong forces of desire and grasping in the mind. We

begin to let go, allowing for the inevitable flow of change, rather than trying to hold on to something, thinking that it will make us happy forever after.

Next, there is a tricky aspect regarding mother love. While mother love is often considered as an example of unconditional love, it can also be seen as an example of selfish love because a mother may protect her own child at the cost of other children or people. In the latter view, mother love is actually seen as craving, not a wholesome position in Buddhism. One way Buddhist stories reconcile the above situation is through generalization of particular mother love to universal unconditional love, although such an idea is not explicit in the original Buddhist writing (Ohnuma, 2007). An analogous idea has been proposed in attachment theory as can be seen in the following passage (Gillath and Shaver, 2005):

attachment theory suggests that the same caregiving behavioral system that evolved to assure adequate care for vulnerable, dependent children can be extended to include care and concern for other people in need, perhaps even compassion for all suffering creatures – an important Buddhist ideal. Research clearly indicates that the condition of the attachment behavioral system affects the workings of the caregiving system, making it likely that heightening attachment security will yield benefits in the realm of compassionate caregiving.

This type of generalization is also commonly seen in the practice of loving-kindness (*metta*) meditation in Buddhism as well as in some approaches in psychotherapy (Dillon, 2008).

Furthermore, some researchers even suspect the connection between secure attachment and balanced, wholesome mind as discussed in Buddhism. Shaver (2006) states that “[a]ttachment theory helps to explain why insecure people are less compassionate and kind than secure people: ‘Caregiving,’ an innate behavioral system, is undermined by attachment insecurity.” In a sense, people with insecure attachment are more preoccupied with self (Gillath and Shaver, 2005). Now, one might think of the contrasting notions of “self” in modern disciplines, e.g., psychotherapy (Dillon, 2008), and “not-self” (*anatta*) in Buddhism. Naturally, the notion of self is taken for granted in the modern world; each individual life is valued so much. In this connection, the notion of not-self seems strange. However, it is one of the three characteristics of existence in Buddhism, along with suffering and impermanence. Buddhism actually does not deny self-consciousness. It rather posits that there is no continuous, permanent entity associated with each individual, also reflecting the notion of impermanence. In a sense, the Buddhist position is not that different from that of recent developments in science. The idea turns out to be supported by some attachment researchers, who argue that continuous self is an illusion and “self” is a collection of attitudes, expectations, meanings, and feelings (as discussed in, e.g., Siegel, 1999).

In a recent interview, Shaver said that there is about 85% overlaps between attachment theory and Buddhist teachings (Digitale, 2006). Although what constitutes the remaining 15% is not clear, I believe that we have already seen a fair amount of convergence so far.

Roads to Well-Being

As discussed above, attachment theory and Buddhist teachings seem to converge with respect to the topic under discussion. Since both of these are highly relevant to a more general notion of well-being, I now proceed to induce the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: All the roads to well-being are consistent.

Since this statement might sound rather grand (or trivial, depending on the view point), some clarifications are in order. First, the hypothesis is about well-being considered broadly, including physical, psychological, social, and possibly even some other aspects. For example, if a person becomes “happy” at the cost of other people, I would not consider it as true well-being. Second, I assume that there are *many* approaches to well-being. Each approach must be applicable to one or more people. So, I would not be surprised to see very different approaches for different groups of people. Third, all of these approaches must be consistent, in the following sense. Suppose that there are two approaches applicable to the same set of people *under the same condition*. The hypothesis says that these approaches cannot be contradictory. Note that it is possible that contradictory approaches are applicable even to the same set of people *under different conditions*, e.g., different places or times. For example, some people practice yoga postures for well-being, while certain postures may be contra-indicated for some others.

Although we initially posed a possibility of contradiction between attachment theory and Buddhist teachings around the notion of attachment, we have been discussing that it is not the case. Thus, this case seems to be within the scope of this hypothesis. If we dig deeper, it might be possible to make even broader connections between attachment theory and Buddhist teachings. On the other hand, the hypothesis would reject exclusionism and fundamentalism as roads to well-being. This is because these approaches would inevitably lead to contradictions. For example, if a religion asserts that the *only* way to heaven is to believe in *their* god(s), not others’, the religion would not lead to well-being. Furthermore, suppose that one approach to health care contradicts some other approaches. Even suppose that some approaches are intentionally set against others in a competition. Would such scenarios lead to well-being? The current state of health care in the United States and in many other countries seems to be a pertinent example in connection to the hypothesis.

According to the hypothesis, roads to well-being must be open-minded. Both attachment theory and Buddhist teachings seem to satisfy this condition. The development of attachment theory demonstrates how rigorously the ideas in the field have been examined by the research community and have been surviving various criticisms (e.g., Karen, 1994). Buddhists are notorious about their open-mindedness. For example, the current Dalai Lama of Tibet (2005) states that “if scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims.” He is well known for his effort to host and/or attend to conferences integrating Buddhism and science. For example, he accepts that some of ancient Buddhist notions of physics and astronomy need to be revised, reflecting the modern discovery. However, much of Buddhist teachings have been supported in recent findings in science. Although the Dalai Lama is probably the best known

on this point, the Buddha himself had repeatedly urged his followers to experiment and verify his words for themselves. It is amazing to see this kind of openness, while some other religions fight against, say, science to the death. This in fact demonstrates people's confidence in Buddhism, which is around for about 2,500 years without conquest through the power of state and/or arms. Note that some of what the Buddha said may appear to violate the present hypothesis. For example, a certain discourse of the Buddha is translated as "the only way" to enlightenment (Soni, 1980). However, the phrase has also been translated as "the direct path," and the word in question means *one* and does not appear to be qualifying (Analayo, 2004).

Again, the hypothesis is grand, and vague. It is not presented for verification or refutation. The potential value of the hypothesis might lie with our attempt to examine many approaches to well-being for their appropriateness.

Mindful Parenting

At the intersection of attachment theory and Buddhist teachings lies the topic of parenting. In particular, we discuss the possibility of promoting secure attachment through the practice of mindfulness. This question has been asked by Shaver (2006) and discussed in some detail by Siegel (2007). The idea is that even parents with insecure attachment could raise children who would be securely attached to them, through the practice of mindfulness meditation or just trying to be mindful in everyday life. However, there are more to this idea, which will be delineated below.

First, we recall that attachment patterns can be identified when infants are one year old. That is, by this time, children already develop their patterns, obviously unconsciously, and tend to carry the traits for the rest of their lives. However, it has been shown that some children with insecure attachment (at the age of one) grow to be classified as secure (using the Adult Attachment Interview, AAI). Although some researchers argue that even an adult with insecure attachment can "earn" secure attachment by way of psychotherapy and possibly with an empathic partner (Germer, 2009; Hughes, 2009; Siegel, 2007), I personally think that it would be rather difficult to earn the secure attachment status that way. On the other hand, my hunch is that the best bet to overcome attachment insecurity would be mindfulness meditation. We will come back to this point later.

Second, although secure attachment may be a gateway to mindfulness, the former does not guarantee the latter. Here is what I discussed in our earlier essay (Komagata and Komagata, 2008). Suppose that a child is securely attached at the age of one. Even if that is the basis, the child will go through all sorts of experience before becoming a parent. As attachment patterns are in principle fixed by the age of one, it is more emotional and certainly unconscious. However, much of the experience which a child goes through after the first few years is more cognitive and conscious. The child will be affected by cognitive and conscious efforts of her parents as well as many other factors in the larger context. When parents provide unconditional love as described in *Unconditional Parenting* (Kohn, 2005), their children would be equipped with the strongest foundation for mindfulness as well as secure attachment. If a child with secure attachment goes through conditional parenting, e.g., through punishments and rewards, she would still remain securely attached and would raise children with secure attachment. However, she

would develop a mind which is so much conditioned at the cognitive level and such a mind would not lead to mindfulness. So, mindfulness is much more than secure attachment.

Now, why then mindfulness meditation might work as a training for parents who are insecurely attached and/or conditional? I think it is because mindfulness meditation can let a person to clearly see what is behind one's mind, including unconscious aspects, while she continues to live her usual life. Note that concentration meditation will not have the same effects; in a sense, it would let the meditator escape from the reality. Unlike suppressing or repressing one's desires or trying to control one's behavior in a forceful manner, the state of understanding gained through mindfulness meditation would let her see how her senses lead to craving and clinging and open a way to stop reacting in such a *conditioned* manner. It is more about listening. It is not intended to control or change one's behavior through the practice, although there would be changes as a result. Since mindfulness meditation could work at all levels of the mind at all time, even unconsciously-engraved part of emotion could be affected. Thus, realizing and being able to see all the conditioning behind insecure attachment could enable one to overcome insecure attachment without trying to "earn" secure attachment. The knowledge of attachment theory would also be helpful, because when one develops mindfulness, she would be able to see it in connection to the ideas developed in attachment theory and thus would be able to communicate with others more effectively.

Although psychotherapy shares many aspects with mindfulness meditation, including access to unconsciousness, I personally see some potential limitations of psychotherapy (without integrating mindfulness training). I think the most essential point of mindfulness training is that one can gain the ability to see things clearly *continuously*. In contrast, psychotherapy seems to focus too much on therapy sessions and may not have enough means to monitor patients out of therapy (as discussed by Kornfield, 2008). A similar point can be said about most of modern approaches in medicine, dentistry, etc. For example, the most essential aspect of periodontal maintenance is home care. Nevertheless, most periodontists lack the means of actually monitoring their patients' daily home care. It is entirely up to the patients, most of who are not properly educated on this point and tend to believe that visiting a periodontist every few months would be sufficient. Without proper home care, routine care and even surgery would be ineffective. Analogous situations can be found in medicine and other areas as well. If a patient is mindful with respect to their periodontal or any other health conditions, she could see what is going on in her body and mind, and could take better care of herself. Recently, mindfulness meditation is adopted or integrated into psychotherapy, stress reduction, education, and many other areas. This clearly suggests the benefit of mindfulness meditation.

So far, we have been discussing more about people with insecure attachment. But what about people with secure attachment? As I wrote earlier, secure attachment is helpful but does not guarantee mindfulness. These are different things. In particular, even people with secure attachment can develop conditional parenting style, e.g., punishments and rewards, mainly through the influence after the development of cognition (Komagata and Komagata, 2008). This kind of conditioning too is hard to remove. Mindfulness meditation would be useful to realize how such conditioning is at work, and the recognition alone may lead to marked improvement. Here is another point. People with secure

attachment may not be able to understand how people with insecure attachment feel and act. With mindfulness, people with secure attachment could better understand how people with different attachment patterns behave.

Finally, people with disorganized attachment will most likely benefit from professional treatment, including psychotherapy. They need to address unresolved issues. Even in this case, therapeutic approach seem to have certain similarities with Buddhist teachings (for an excellent approach, see Hughes, 2006).

So, in any case, it would be beneficial to recognize one's own attachment pattern. Then, we can proceed with appropriate paths, possibly with the help of mindfulness meditation.

Conclusion

In this essay, we resolve the potential conflict around the notion of "attachment" in attachment theory and Buddhist teachings. That is, secure attachment (seen as a desirable state based on attachment theory, rather than "attachment" vs. "non-attachment") and non-craving in Buddhism (as the more precise meaning of "non-attachment") point to the same direction and there is no contradiction. The discussion is supported by the analysis of bereavement and findings in neuroscience. In addition, the essay discusses how secure attachment can be seen in terms of other Buddhist notions: the middle way, impermanence, and not-self. Then, this observation leads to the hypothesis: all the roads to well-being are consistent. The main implication of this hypothesis is that well-being needs to be open minded. In other words, exclusivist positions would not lead to well-being. Finally, the notion of non-craving, as practiced in mindfulness meditation can be applied to parenting and self-improvement, including the case of insecure attachment in particular and conditional thinking in general.

I hope that even people with little familiarity with attachment theory or Buddhism can appreciate the point made in this essay and develop interests in these areas. Once the initial confusion is removed these areas are closer than one would normally think. Furthermore, the present discussion opens a new way to discuss well-being in connection to these areas, especially with respect to the hypothesis.

Even though this essay must have shortcomings and loose ends, it can be a good starting point for discussion on the topic at the intersection of attachment theory and Buddhism. I would be happy to see more discussion of the topic in the future.

References

Note: The URLs below were valid as of August 1, 2009.

Analayo. 2004. *Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization*. Birmingham, UK: Windhorse Publications.

- Copeland, Liz. 2007. Buddhist Parenting: The Unattached Attachment Parent. http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/119156/buddhist_parenting_the_unattached_attachment.html?cat=25.
- Digitale, Erin. 2006. Psychologist gets feedback on research regarding compassion and feeling secure. *UC Davis Spotlight* (http://www.ucdavis.edu/spotlight/0505/dalai_lama.html).
- Dillon, Jacqueline Ann. 2008. Escaping the 'Monkey Trap': How might psychotherapists utilise Buddhist approaches towards cultivating non-attachment within psychotherapeutic practise? Thesis: Master of Health Science (Psychotherapy), Auckland University of Technology [<http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/handle/10292/682>].
- George, Carol and Solomon, Judith. 1999. Attachment and Caregiving: The Caregiving Behavioral System. In *Handbook of attachment: theory, research, and clinical applications*, eds. Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver, 649-670. New York: Guilford Press.
- Germer, Christopher K. 2009. *The mindful path to self-compassion: freeing yourself from destructive thoughts and emotions*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Ghose, Lynken. 2004. A Study in Buddhist Psychology: is Buddhism truly pro-detachment and anti-attachment? *Contemporary Buddhism* 5(2):105-120.
- Gillath, Omri and Shaver, Phillip R. 2005. An Attachment-Theoretical Approach to Compassion and Altruism. In *Compassion: Its Nature and Use in Psychotherapy*, ed. P. Gilbert, 121-147. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Goldstein, Joseph and Kornfield, Jack. 1987. *Seeking the heart of wisdom: the path of insight meditation*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2006. *The happiness hypothesis: finding modern truth in ancient wisdom*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hughes, Daniel A. 2006. *Building the bonds of attachment: awakening love in deeply troubled children*, 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson.
- Hughes, Daniel A. 2009. *Attachment-focused parenting: effective strategies to care for children*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Kabat-Zinn, Myla and Kabat-Zinn, Jon. 1997. *Everyday blessings: the inner work of mindful parenting*. New York: Hyperion.
- Karen, Robert. 1994. *Becoming attached: unfolding the mystery of the infant-mother bond and its impact on later life*. New York: Warner Books.
- Kirkpatrick, Lee A. 2005. *Attachment, evolution, and the psychology of religion*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kohn, Alfie. 2005. *Unconditional parenting: moving from rewards and punishments to love and reason*. New York: Atria Books.

- Komagata, Nobo and Komagata, Sachiko. 2008. Unconditional Parenting and Secure Attachment. <http://nobo.komagata.net/pub/Komagata+08-UnconditionalSecure.html>.
- Kornfield, Jack. 2008. *The wise heart: a guide to the universal teachings of Buddhist psychology*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Moffitt, Phillip. 2008. *Dancing with life: Buddhist insights for finding meaning and joy in the face of suffering*. New York: Rodale.
- Napthali, Sarah. 2003. *Buddhism for mothers: a calm approach to caring for yourself and your children*. Crows Nest, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Nichtern, Ethan. 2009. Meditation: "Attachment" is the Worst Failure Ever (Apologies to Republicans). *beliefnet* (<http://blog.beliefnet.com/onecity/2009/07/meditation-attachment-is-the-worst-failure-ever-apologies-to-republicans.html>).
- Ohnuma, Reiko. 2007. Mother-Love and Mother-Grief: South Asian Buddhist Variations on a Theme. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23(1):95-116.
- Rahula, Walpola Sri. 1974. *What the Buddha taught*, Rev. ed. New York: Grove Press.
- Shaver, Phillip R. 2006. Adult attachment theory: Does it relate to anxiety, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness? *SBM pre-conference, Santa Clara University (3/22/06)*, http://www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/partners/spirituality/upload/s08_shaver.ppt.
- Siegel, Daniel J. 1999. *The developing mind: toward a neurobiology of interpersonal experience*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Siegel, Daniel J. 2007. *The mindful brain: reflection and attunement in the cultivation of well-being*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Soni, R. L. 1980. *The only way to deliverance*. Boulder: Prajna Press.
- The Dalai Lama. 2005. *The universe in a single atom: the convergence of science and spirituality*. New York: Morgan Road Books.
- Vogel, Laurel. 2008. Buddhist detachment and attachment theory. <http://www.mukilteocounseling.com/blog/?p=21>.
- Zimberoff, Diane and Hartman, David. 2002. Attachment, Detachment, Nonattachment: Achieving Synthesis. *Journal of Heart-Centered Therapies* 5(1):3-94.