

The Relational and the Non-Relational Dimensions of Buddhist Practice

by Gil Fronsdal

Buddhism offers teachings, practices, and profound realizations for two different dimensions of life: the relational and the non-relational. Classically, these two were referred to as the conditioned and the unconditioned dimensions. A modern way of distinguishing them is to point out that the first has to do with that which occurs or exists only in relationship to other things. The second is that which is independent of any relationship to anything else. In human terms, the first involves all the ways of behaving and thinking which are relational. The second are the non-relational ways of being. When these two ways are emphasized equally they complement each other in creating a balanced life. Sometimes, however, one dimension is emphasized while the other is neglected, or even belittled. The cost of doing so is often a painful segregation of these two important aspects of life.

In the Buddhist analysis, almost everything we do and think involves being in relationship with something. Our concerns can be focused on other people, the external world, and ourselves, including the complex inner world of ideas, opinions, feelings, preferences, and desires. This is not surprising since our very existence depends on being supported by things that exist in relationship to us. Normally when we care for our physical, emotional, and social needs we are acting in relationship to the sources of satisfaction for those needs. When we care for someone who is suffering, we are relating to that person.

Many aspects of the relational world are quite beautiful and inspiring; compassion, love, and generosity are among the most meaningful attitudes that arise in relationship to others. Appreciating how our lives are thoroughly dependent on the supportive relationships of innumerable people, mostly unknown, can give birth to a gratitude that is experienced as deeply spiritual. Direct realizations of how interconnected everything in the world is can be among the most significant experiences in a person's life. At the upper reaches of healthy relationships to the world are powerful, mystical experiences of oneness, and unity. These can include pervasive feelings of universal love that some people see as the pinnacle of their spiritual life.

Many, if not most, Buddhist teachings are concerned with creating healthy relationships within the relational world. This is certainly the case for the foundational practices of generosity, ethics, loving-kindness and compassion. Many of the inner practices, such as meditation, involve transforming how we relate to ourselves so that we don't undermine our life with negative attitudes and instead regard ourselves with respect and loving-kindness.

One of the most important insights of Buddhism similarly concerns the relational world. The understanding that allowed the Buddha to become liberated was his insight into how things of the world arise in dependent relationship with other things. Nothing that appears exists alone. Everything exists in relationship. By understanding this, when the Buddha saw that suffering exists in a dependent relationship to craving, he could then see how suffering could be brought to an end when the craving ceases.

While Buddhism puts great emphasis on developing healthy and wise relationships to the world, it also includes an understanding of the drawbacks of the relational world: Interconnectedness is dangerous when a tick infects us with Lyme disease or we lose our job because it is outsourced abroad. Unity can be oppressive when a person feels trapped in a social, economic, or political structure where what one can and can't do is controlled by others.

Buddhism never tires in pointing out that the relational world is unstable and unpredictable. The relationships upon which our life depends can change or even disappear in a moment. This includes our relationships to other people, to things, to activities, to our bodies, and to all the other various aspects of ourselves. If our happiness is dependent on the relational world, then our happiness will be as unstable and changeable as is the world.

When someone meditates it becomes clear that most of our mental activity is concerned with things and people we are in relationship with. It can be quite humbling to realize how compulsive and stressful this mental activity is. Even when our thoughts and feelings about others are healthy and appropriate ones, in meditation even these can hold us back from a deeper, abiding sense of peace. To experience the fullest possibility of peace and freedom we need to put to rest all our preoccupations and concerns, at least temporarily. Our mind does not need to be constantly relating to something. It is possible to still the activity of the mind and so experience a peace that is a radical alternative to how the mind usually operates. For this purpose, Buddhism points to the non-relational dimension of consciousness.

When someone experiences how nourishing the non-relational way of being is, they realize there is a happiness that is not dependent on the conditions of their lives or of the world. If someone believes happiness is only found in particular relationships with the world, then it makes sense to try to control, change, and cling to people, things, and circumstances. When an alternative is known, it is a lot easier to relax the grip of clinging and dependency. It can be a lot easier to meditate when we realize we don't have to always be thinking about things.

The non-relational dimension of the mind is found through a not-doing, and so involves letting go of our efforts to do, accomplish, avoid, and change what is happening. Most often, this is a gradual process of calming down and quieting the mind. As the mind becomes more still, a point is reached when the meditator realizes that wanting further deepening of the peace is the very thing that stands in the way of this peace. At some point even letting go can be too much doing. Letting things be becomes the only possibility.

As we calm down it is possible to sense a way of being in this world which is non-relational. That is, our minds are not operating with any concerns or relationships to anything. With this comes a deepening sense of well-being. As our mind becomes less preoccupied with the relational world, deeper wellsprings of loving-kindness, empathy, and insight can arise. Our relationships tend to become healthier, simpler and more straightforward.

As the mind becomes simpler, more peaceful and less caught up in things, a time comes when all the intentional and relational activity of the mind comes to a stop. Awareness can exist without it being brought into the service of the mind's desires and aversions. It just is. This non-relational way of being defies

exact definition. It is impossible to cling to this state or to claim it as one's own because to do so is to leave the non-relational state and return to being in relationship to something. It is a little like grabbing an open hand with the hand itself – the open hand disappears as soon as the hand closes around itself. We can know that we are experiencing the mind that is not relating to anything but we can't touch it with thought, description or any form of self-appropriation.

To have a full experience of the non-relational state of mind is to experience one of the most profound forms of well-being, peace, and liberation. To have confidence in this possibility, and even better, to feel the continued background presence of this dimension in one's mind, allows one to live in the relational world with ease and wisdom. It also opens our hearts to greater compassion, which is one of the most valuable emotions of the relational world. In Buddhism the combination of these two – liberation and compassion, non-relational and relational – is considered the ultimate relationship. Ideally the two dimensions go hand in hand, and as your practice matures you get the best of both worlds.