

September 2008

## NON-ATTACHMENT

Sages have said that one of the essential qualities needed for leading a spiritual life is a quality of sublime non-attachment. Often this is confused with a demeanor of smug aloofness from the world or an attitude of cold indifference to the welfare of others. In the spiritual books of India, this quality of detachment is indicated by the Sanskrit word *vairāgya*. One advantage of using an unfamiliar Sanskrit term is that it may prompt the reader to pause and reflect on the meaning behind the word. In *The Way of the Disciple*, Clara Codd describes *vairāgya* as “the ability to stand serene and steady under all circumstances.” In the New Testament, one of the Beatitudes declares, “Blessed are the poor in heart.” To interpret this in the light of non-attachment sheds new meaning on a familiar biblical passage, which has often been wrongly understood in the literal sense as being an endorsement of material deprivation. Was not the “poverty” that Jesus spoke of a state of mind in which there exists no psychological attachment to material things or to a false sense of identity based on worldly perceptions and petty self-centered concerns?

One of the obstacles to developing non-attachment is the strong sense of likes and dislikes that so many of us harbor. If someone irritates us, it’s often easier to criticize than remain serene. If we have a pleasant experience, we want to repeat that experience. If we endure an unpleasant event, it’s generally easier to complain than remain philosophical. If we enjoy a singular moment of success, there may be a tendency to dwell in the past while life moves on. As long as we identify with our emotional reactions to outer circumstances, we are drifting like a boat without a rudder. When things go our way, all is right with the world. But when faced with a sudden crisis, we are tossed this way and that by the storms of life.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus had some advice, which still remains relevant in today’s turbulent world: “Never say of anything that I have lost it, only that I have given it back.” Is this not another way of saying, “Blessed are the poor in heart”? Detachment implies letting go of attitudes, memories, and opinions. Can we move gracefully from youth to old age if we insist on clinging to the past? If we are an older person, do we feel somewhat diminished in retirement because we no longer hold that high profile job we once held? As parents, do we feel emptiness inside when our children grow up and leave the nest? Can we be thankful for the life experiences we have had—whether pleasant or painful— but be free enough to live in the present moment while not being burdened by the past?

Like a river moving downstream without pause, the events of life come and go. Each stage of our life provides special lessons for the indwelling soul. A strong sense of non-attachment allows us to navigate the ever-flowing river of life without capsizing or floundering during the inevitable storms and gales that we are sure to encounter along the way.

David P. Bruce  
Director of Education