

Attachment and Detachment: Indian Philosophical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to ascertain the importance of Eastern concepts in enhancing happiness and well-being in one's life. The focus of this paper is on attachment i.e. state of being personally attached, having affectionate regard or attachment to a cause. On the opposite pole, is Detachment, i.e. an indifference to worldly concerns, aloofness and freedom from bias and prejudice. While both these concepts are poles apart, a balance of both is considered essential and ideal by various religions and psychologists. The teachings and principles of attachment and detachment are therapeutic in nature since they're so closely related to emotions and guide one's behavior. Thus, this study is in a growing line of research that attempts to draw relationships between core beliefs of Indian philosophy and happiness.

Keywords: Attachment, detachment, happiness

One promising approach to study attachment and detachment can be traced back to the Srimad Bhagvad Gita, the holiest relic of the Hindu religion. Asakti is the Sanskrit word for 'attachment' and 'anasakti' is the Sanskrit word for 'detachment' (Namita & Naidu, 1992). A notion regarding attachment and detachment is clearly visible in the cultures and societies of the world. Even though the Western world has had a very heavy influence on the Eastern world over so many years, detachment has survived in the east as a noble and desired goal. On the same lines, following are the perspectives on attachment and detachment espoused by various theoretical viewpoints.

Yogic Perspective: Attachment and Detachment

Attachment, can be defined as a feeling of affection for something or someone. According to yogis and Hindu mythology, attachment is a somewhat negative trait as it encourages the idea of possession, and a sense of ownership. It causes us to rely on tangible and materialistic things for deriving pleasure and satisfaction. They believe that a person who is higher on attachment will have a consumerist approach towards everything and

everyone. His happiness will always be dependent on external sources and thus he will always have to face disappointment, this will lead to a constant swing of moods from euphoria to sorrow (Bhushan, 1994). This kind of extreme unpredictability and disuniformity is considered to be the root of an individual's torments and conflicts that lead to anxiety, stress and strain in personal relationships.

On the other end of the spectrum lies the word detachment which translates to 'anasakti'. The literal meaning of detachment would be a state of indifference and isolation. Now contrary to what most people believe, yogis actually see detachment as a positive force. It was also widely applied by Mahatma Gandhi. Yogis believe that detachment somewhat liberates an individual. If he is not attached to anything or anyone, he won't rely on anyone for his happiness. He will have free will and will be the master of his universe. However, it has been clearly said that detachment doesn't refer to total isolation or aloofness. It merely means that the individual shouldn't become overly invested in objects and other people. He should simply separate the matters of heart and have a purely practical approach towards life.

However, the yogic view promotes detachment as an ideal way of life over *asakti*. They strongly believe that detachment can help an individual lead a balanced and happy life. By simply detaching oneself from worldly pleasures and other's emotions an individual can separate himself while also maintaining his emotional connection with others (Sandra, 2013).

PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: ATTACHMENT AND DETACHMENT

Psychodynamic viewpoint

Sigmund Freud (1896) founded this school of psychology and strongly asserted that *initial five years of child's development is so imperative as it shapes the personality being an adult*. The psychodynamic view introduced us to the structure of psyche i.e., id, ego and superego, and propounds that all conflicts arise from an intrapsychic dispute between the three. According to this perspective the ego has to be more dominant than both the id and the superego in order to maintain balance between the two and keep them from becoming overly powerful. In psychology, attachment and detachment are connected with ego defense and hence fall under the subject matter of psychoanalysis.

While psychoanalysis's emphasize the importance of ego as being supreme, yogists challenge this view by questioning what happens when the ego becomes all powerful and dominant. According to yoga psychologists such a state would lead to 'ahamkara' or feelings of immense pride. This happens when the ego gets overly attached. This leads to an increase in aggression and hostile feelings. The individual constantly feels the need to exert his power over others and this can lead to maladaptive behaviors which place a precedent for abnormality. Hence while psychoanalysis backs the importance of ego, yoga psychologists condemn this aggrandizement of the ego. To elucidate further the concepts of attachment and detachment, the following theories are imperative to discuss.

Attachment theory

Attachment Theory, propounded by John Bowlby in early 1960's saw attachment as something that is developed in the formative years of life, *for example how an infant gets attached to its primary caretaker which is usually the mother*. It seeks to explain how

this attachment formed in developmental years influences one's concept of security, trust and safety. He greatly advocated the positive role played by attachment in nurturing a child. Bowlby also said that children who were high on attachment were more open to taking risks and trying new things in contrast to the detached kids who will always seek external help in everything they do. This happened mostly because attached kids have already had most of their needs fulfilled by the caregiver. To support this claim, Bowlby conducted a study on 44 juvenile delinquents in a clinical setting. He found that more than half of the thieves had been separated from their mothers for a minimum period of six months in the first five years of their life. Hence, he concluded that attachment is an innate need and we are born with it (Bowlby, 1969). This theory widely contradicts the view of yoga psychologists who believe it is possible for an individual to be loving and affectionate without getting attached (Saul, 2007).

Object relations Theory

The objects relation theory given by Melanie Klein in the mid 1900's is somewhat similar to Bowlby's theory in the sense that it too suggested that a child forms an attachment to an object in its very formative years and the object is usually an image of the mother. Later the object can even be a tangible thing that had an impact on the child in the developmental years (Mary 1969). *Attachment is an inborn need of a person and thus can never be absent in a healthy and stable individual*. Those devoid of attachment are likely to develop psychopathic tendencies. Hence, this theory too opposes the view given by the yoga psychologists.

Behaviorist viewpoint

It was suggested by Behaviorists that attachment is learned by a child through classical and operant condition from day one. As soon as the mother feeds a child, feelings of attachment are formed. Many studies have been conducted in this regard by Harlow, Lorenz and Bowlby. *The basis of the theory is that children come into this world biologically pre programmed to form attachments*. Therefore, this perspective too counters the yogic perspective. It proves that attachment formation is imperative to a fully functioning individual and detachment leads

to conflict formation and dysfunctional behaviors later in life. This has been further confirmed by various studies conducted on juvenile delinquents, addicts and vandalisms.

ATTACHMENT AND DETACHMENT IN INDIAN CONTEXT

It is a well known fact that eastern cultures are much more collectivistic and promote the idea of 'group cohesion'. Countries like India, China, etc are examples of collectivistic cultures. Basically, in the eastern culture, attachment is seen as something that an individual needs to be rid of. The aim in eastern cultures and according to scriptures in both Hinduism and Buddhism is to detach oneself from worldly possessions and emotions (Jayaram, 2012) Hence, we can postulate that detachment is the norm in the East. In Srimad Bhagvad Gita itself there have been specifically 150 verses related to Asakti and Anasakti- 85 verses that deal with Anasakti and about 65 verses dealing with Asakti (Banth & Talwar, 2012).

It is clearly stated that forming attachment leads to desire which leads to aggression and hence stops an individual from attaining enlightenment and self actualization. The Gita advises one to be completely altruistic in ones actions and dutifully do good deeds without expecting anything in return as 'Karma' will make sure you get what you deserve. *The Indian perspective can be understood by turning to the spiritual wisdom of the east that has its core ways to be eternally and unconditionally happy and satisfied (Ananda (pure happiness) and Nitya Tripti (eternal fulfillment and satisfaction) irrespective of internal or circumstantial limitations (Banth & Talwar, 2012). Anasakti is not about the surrender of the objects of the word.*

In Buddhism too, attachment is seen as the root cause of all human suffering and interpersonal conflicts. *Renouncing of material things and a household life has been practiced in Buddhism since the beginning however Buddhists refrain from using the word detachment.* They prefer to call it non-attachment and describe it as a state in which one simply gives up the need to possess and own material things. He doesn't let sensual pleasures or objects guide his actions anymore. Instead he tries to let go of these desires and lower his need for pleasure seeking and in doing so he becomes more compassionate. He

doesn't feel anger or hostility anymore. The ultimate aim of such an individual would be to attain solace and enlightenment. This view is widely supported by yoga psychologists as well.

On the other hand, there are western cultures that are much more individualistic and promote the idea of individual growth. Examples of such countries are USA, UK etc. In western nations attachment is preferred over detachment. Attachment to positive thoughts and emotions is encouraged (Alexander, 2011).

Even according to *Christianity an individual is told to strike a balance between attachment and detachment instead of refuting either one completely.* There are several scriptures in the Bible that advocate this ideal of blending both these concepts together for overall and wholesome growth of the individual. While it has been seen that western cultures promote a capitalistic thinking in which luxuries of life and material growth is given more importance than self growth, this belief is widely changing as the popularity of yoga and positive psychology is growing among these nations. *Hence, slowly detachment from material things while strengthening attachment with fellow beings is being considered the ideal way to a happier life.*

MODERN DAY APPLICATION OF ATTACHMENT AND DETACHMENT

The researcher wants to draw attention towards the modern day applications of attachment and detachment which also elucidates its relevance to focus on such concepts as well. It can be applied to any population i.e. student, adolescent, middle age, or old age as everyone has a pursuit for happiness and well-being.

- ❑ Since in today's world it is impossible for an individual to live in isolation and in complete detachment he should continue being attached to necessities like food, shelter, sleep etc but he should become introspective and work to increase his self restraint.
- ❑ The individual should have control over his needs and should be able to deny desirable and pleasurable things.
- ❑ Everything should be done in moderation and self discipline should be given utmost importance.

- ❑ For people suffering from depression it is sometimes useful to detach oneself from the surroundings and concentrate only on oneself.
- ❑ An individual should be empathetic, compassionate and helpful towards others without expecting anything in return in order to lead a wholesome and happy life.

Final Remark!

While yoga psychologists greatly advocate the importance of detachment, psychoanalysts and behaviorists emphasize attachment as an innate need of every individual without which he will not be able to lead a happy and normal life let alone reach the stage of self actualization. Similarly while in the eastern nations, detachment or anasakti is considered important, in the western nations attachment is given more preference. A deeper probe into the analysis aids at concluding that the popularity and meaning of both these concepts differs from culture to culture and much of it is just conjecture thus, it can be said that research can be done to find their relevance to life, philosophy and human psychology.

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