

Can you LOVE without attachment?

Our new columnist, the venerable Robina Courtin is an outspoken, tough and fiery Buddhist nun. Each month she answers your questions concerning Buddhism in a modern world. This month it's how to love without attachment

First of all, we assume that love and attachment mean the same thing. But the Buddhist way of understanding our emotions is that attachment is the neurotic, needy, dissatisfied part of us that yearns for someone out there, believing that when we get him, we'll be happy.

Love, on the other hand, is referring to an altruistic part of our being – a connection with others, wish that they be happy, and delight in their wellbeing. We have both of these, of course, but it's so hard to see the difference. They're like milk and water mixed together. If there's any joy in our relationship, it's because of love. If there's anger and hurt and jealousy and the rest, it's the result of attachment.

Attachment is such a simple word, but it's multi-faceted. At the most fundamental level it's that feeling of neediness deep inside us; that belief that somehow I am not enough, I don't have enough, and no matter what I do or what I get, it's never enough. Then, of course, because we're so convinced it's true, we hanker after someone out there, and when we find the one who triggers our good feelings, we attach ourselves to getting them, convinced they're the one who will fulfill our needs and make us truly happy and content. We assume they're our possession, and almost an extension of who we are.

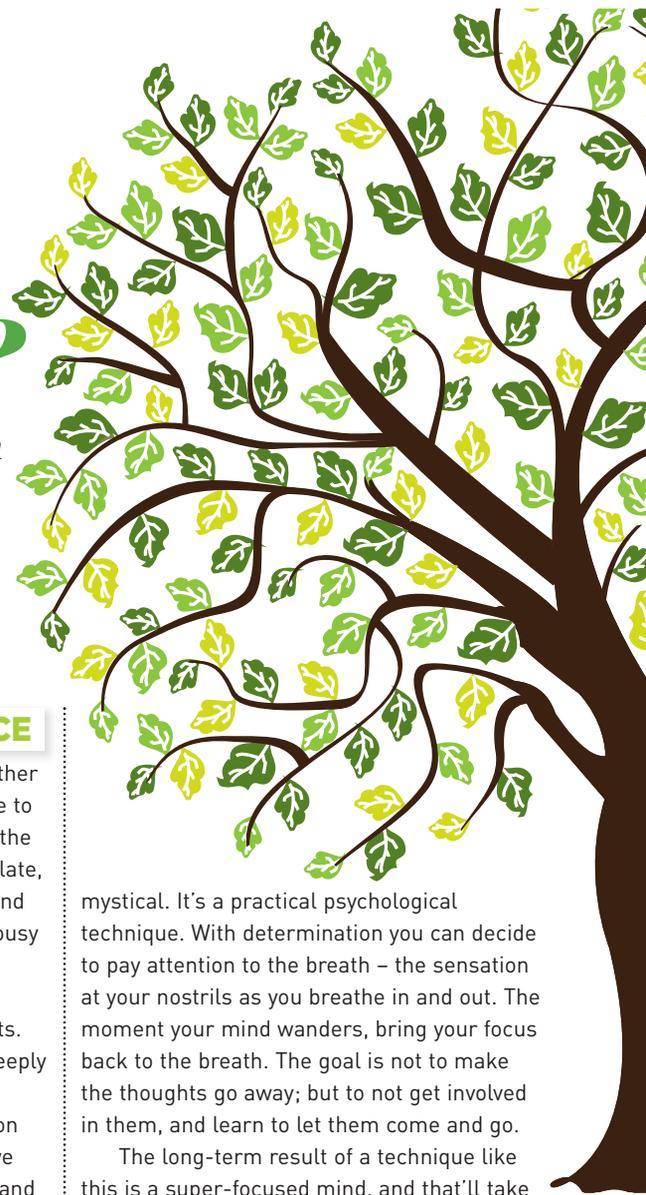
“At the most fundamental level, attachment is that feeling of neediness deep inside us; that belief that somehow I am not enough”

THE UNHAPPINESS SOURCE

This attachment is the source of all our other unhappy emotions. Because it's desperate to get what it wants, the minute it doesn't – the moment he doesn't ring, or comes home late, or looks at someone else – panic arises and immediately turns to anger and then jealousy or low-self esteem, or whatever our old habits are. In fact, anger is the response when attachment doesn't get what it wants. All these assumptions are ingrained so deeply within us, and we believe these stories so totally, it seems ridiculous to even question them. But we need to. And the only way we can do that is by knowing our own minds and feelings: in other words, we need to learn how to be our own therapists.

The fact is attachment, anger, jealousy and any other painful emotion are not set in stone; they're old habits, and we know we can change those. The first step is to be confident that by knowing our own minds well we can learn to distinguish the various emotions inside us and gradually learn to change them. The first challenge involves truly believing you can accomplish this. And that alone is huge – without it, we're stuck.

The next stage is to step back from all the endless chatter in our heads. A really simple way to do that – it's so basic it's boring! – is for just a few minutes every morning, before we start our day, to sit down and focus on something. The breath is a good start. It's nothing special; there's no trick to it; it's not



mystical. It's a practical psychological technique. With determination you can decide to pay attention to the breath – the sensation at your nostrils as you breathe in and out. The moment your mind wanders, bring your focus back to the breath. The goal is not to make the thoughts go away; but to not get involved in them, and learn to let them come and go.

The long-term result of a technique like this is a super-focused mind, and that'll take time. But the almost immediate benefit will be that, as we attempt to step back from all the stories in our head, we will begin to be objective about them and slowly start to unravel, deconstruct, and eventually change them. It's said one of the signs of success is thinking we're getting worse! But we're not. We're starting to hear the stories more clearly, and it's then that we can begin to change them.

BIOGRAPHY



Australian-born Tibetan Buddhist nun Robina Courtin travels the world teaching Buddhist psychology and philosophy and helping those in need. Well-known for her work for 14 years with people in prisons in the US and Australia, including inmates on death row, Robina's life and work is the subject of Amiel Courtin-Wilson's award-winning film *Chasing Buddha*. Visit robinacourtin.com.