

Attachment Mastery

*and the Confusion Caused by Detachment
as a Spiritual Practice*



*Randy Compton
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*"Be very kind to yourself as you explore early attachment.
You're going into very tender territory."
-Diane Poole Heller*

*"It is all about love!"
-Diane's Heller's father's last few
words before he died*

Introduction

How we attach to others in the early months of our lives has a huge impact on the way we see and relate to the world. And it can set the course of our relationship behavior for the rest of our lives. Our attachment patterns have an enormous consequence for how we give and take in love. We can feel secure, anxious, dismissive or confused. Fortunately if you don't have a secure attachment system, this early patterning can be repaired and re-wired with a modest amount of awareness, a sincere effort to do so and a capable other or therapist who can guide us through our limitations and defenses. The good news is that we are designed for secure attachment; it is inherent within us and it is our birthright.

This paper is a short summary of the four main attachment styles, the issues therapists face when working with clients, and a brief discussion of a few ideas around attachment mastery, including the confusion that the spiritual principle of detachment has caused with people with a less than secure attachment system. It is possible that when you read this, some feelings and sensations may arise so notice what comes up for you in addition to where you may agree or disagree with the content.

Attachment Styles

Too often, people don't know about their own attachment issues and adaptive styles. It is not usually the presenting issue either when they enter therapy or when they enter into an intimate relationship with a partner or friend. Other issues take center stage and one's attachment system remains behind the scenes, as the quiet director of our social engagement buried like treasure in the highly conscious cells and structure of our body. It isn't seen and rarely felt because it lies as an implicit, sub-psychological, pre-verbal imprint. But it is there affecting almost every aspect of our lives, even our spiritual lives. Eighty percent of relationship issues are related to our attachment styles.

Early attachment systems develop very early on. It starts in utero and continues until we are two years old. It is our relational template. There are four key attachment styles or adaptations, three of which are adaptive strategies (#2, 3 & 4):

1. **Secure Attachment**- a caring presence with attunement and emotional responsiveness
2. **Absent-Avoidant Attachment**- a dismissive, absent and distant way of relating that avoids contact due to the significant other having been gone too much
3. **Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment**- a hyper-vigilant, anxious way of relating that is pre-occupied with significant other due to the significant other being inconsistently present

4. **Confused-Disorganized Attachment**- a confused, disoriented way of relating that is both dismissive and hyper-vigilant due to mixed messages early on

We are all mixtures of each attachment style, though many of us have one style which takes center stage. Attachment styles can also be situation specific—that is, certain styles will emerge with certain people and their attachment styles. If our predominant style is not secure attachment, we can all do the work necessary to get back to a secure attachment with self and other.

Secure Attachment

A secure attachment is...

- An easy, relaxed flow between contact and aloneness, between self and other, between connection and separation
- "Just right" skin to skin contact and relational and caring acts, like brushing another's hair
- Secure, loving tone of voice
- Safe, nourishing touch
- An attachment gaze or "gleam beam" that gives visual nourishment
- Having "go to" people to express feelings, be heard and receive gourmet contact nutrition
- Emotional attunement, or the experience of "getting gotten" where someone keeps going until you feel truly seen and understood
- Feeling a deep trust that the universe is friendly, that there is basic goodness, that it will work out in the end, even when things are difficult
- A positive holding environment and relational field that is strengthened by repair when things go wrong (which is 80% of relationship success)
- Predictable
- Being a human witness to one another
- Play and playfulness
- Respecting babies and our own "inner child", "little one", or "holy child" as super-sentient¹ and super-sensitive

It's saying...

"I love you. You are special to me. I want to be with you."

*"How is it to have someone actually listen to you and respond to what you ask for?
What does that feel like?"*

A secure attachment is our birthright. But, if we don't have this template from the beginning, receiving love and contact can be too much and we often resort to compensating behaviors to

¹ Here is one definition: "Supersentience means that our true sentient nature is truly more than just thought, emotion and sensation. It is pure feeling. Pure feeling is not an emotion but a knowing." From <http://burtharding.blogspot.com>, August 26, 2008

fend off the intensity of the love, and the intensity of love as spiritual energy. A secure attachment system also knows how to regulate one's own loving energy towards others, knowing how much another person can handle so it is a secure and welcome experience and not a threatening one.

Absent-Avoidant Attachment

An absent avoidant attachment is...

- A lack of emotional attunement
- A relational system started by parents who (or an early attachment environment that) neglected you, neglected expressing feelings, and/or had a flat affect; parents who left you alone too much; parents of task-only focused parenting which over developed the left brain so your emotional and relational muscles atrophied
- An emotional desert, where there aren't many feelings and little contact
- Self-regulating by isolating oneself emotionally and rejecting another's attempt to connect
- Denying or being unconnected to our own needs and thus feeling superior in not needing others
- Not missing other people who are significant to us
- Wanting people around but at a distance and not in the same room unless invited
- Gaze aversion
- The experience of feeling over-stimulated by contact and needing to zone out to regulate the intensity of contact
- Stress on approach
- Anger covered over by vacancy, despair, and collapse
- An over-focus on Self and under-focus on Other
- An adaptive strategy for dealing with being neglected too often and developing an atrophied attachment system that gets overwhelmed by contact

It's saying...

"I don't want to be around you. I feel alone. I have cut off feelings that I need you."

"How is it to have someone neglect you for so long that you give up needing another person just to feel safe and secure?"

*"How is it to have someone actually listen to you and respond to what you ask for?
What does that feel like?"*

"You are allowed to have your feelings. You are welcome in this world."

Absent-avoidant adaptive styles find safety in their isolation. It helps them avoid further harm. But it doesn't allow for healing and over time the internal resentment builds and can create simmering or volcanic rage. The only true means of repair is slow, steady, contact that seeks to bring a person out of their cave and into a full, secure relationship with the world.

In their isolation, absent avoidant types tend to have a positive story about their history because they are not truly feeling their history. To bring feeling back on board requires a person to dive into painful feelings and to allow for deep grief to be felt and expressed. One begins to feel the vulnerability of having a need. Once this begins to happen, the longing to connect will come back, a longing—and a sense of needing others—which has been buried for many years.

Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment

An anxious-ambivalent attachment is...

- Feeling anxious and worried that the other person will leave you once again
- A relational system started by parents who (or an early attachment environment that) were inconsistent and unpredictable in giving love and presence
- An emotional swampland, where there are so many feelings and preoccupation with contact
- Over-focused on another since the other is who will make or break your sense of security and Self
- Having an urgent need to be close with others and a disabling fear of losing it; the other person may come but they will eventually leave
- Being convinced of disappointments in relationships
- Having one's "signal cry" stuck on ON—I need you, I need you, I need you...
- Self-regulating by connecting to the other; realizing self by being with another
- Intermittent contact leading to a feeling of "never enough"
- Stress on separation
- Anger covered over by fretting, complaining, and insecurity
- An under-focus on self and over-focus on other
- An adaptive strategy for dealing with being inconsistently attended to and developing a hyper-vigilant attachment system that gets preoccupied with contact

It's saying...

"I need you but I know you are going to leave."

"How is it to have someone always come and go for you that you feel a deep need for them to always be around?"

"If someone could have been there for you, what would that have felt like?"

"You are enough all by yourself."

Anxious-ambivalent adaptive styles find a pseudo-safety in their ability to continually search for the other. It gives them a sense of security that they are always on the lookout for contact and separation. Their complaining gives them a sense of security of being right when things do go wrong and when people do leave.

But, by developing a stronger sense of Self and beginning to wean oneself from an over-dependence on the Other, one can find the easy relational flow of a secure attachment where

one can feel a sense of interdependence based on the predictable nature of love's ebb and flow. The ebb soon becomes nourishing and one lives with a sense of abundance rather than scarcity.

Confused-Disorganized Attachment

A confused-disorganized attachment is...

- Not feeling safe nor feeling empowered
- A relational system started by parents who (or an early attachment environment that) were threatening, absent, and unpredictable in offering love and presence causing one to be invisible in order to feel safe
- Both absent and anxious, avoidant and disorganized (or disoriented), not sure whether to feel anxious or absent and feeling both at the same time
- Lacking a competent protector
- Flipping between the extremes of wanting to be connected and wanting to be alone; wanting to bond and wanting to escape
- A combination of one's "signal cry" being too much ON at one time and too much OFF at another
- Feeling flooded with the gas (fight/flight) and the brakes (freeze) on—traumatized
- Not being able to relax into feelings of secure attachment without a threat response being turned on
- A feeling of fear and rage
- Feeling afraid of being crazy since one can't be sure what to feel
- Fragmented
- An adaptive strategy for dealing with a threatening environment and developing an attachment system that seeks security, protection, and clarity

It's saying...

"I don't feel safe around you but I also need to be close to you."

"How is it to want someone and feel scared about being with them?"

"If you could escape, what would that be like? Who would you go with?"

"I know you are angry. You have a right to be angry."

Confused-disorganized adaptive styles are truly traumatized. They don't know what to feel, which way to turn or how to respond so they often just freeze and get flooded at the same time. People in this situation feel torn between running away from anger or threatening behavior and wanting to bond out of need and instinct. It's debilitating, disorienting and the best a person can do is fragment so at least a part of them can move forward. But with patience, one can begin to develop an external and internal "competent protector" who will be completely committed to their careful and loving contact.

Therapeutic Tools

Repairing attachment wounds has to be done in relationship. While resting and calming the system down can be done by oneself, the wound is relational so the healing must happen in relationship.

I believe therapists have three main tools at their disposal:

- 1) **Their own personal experience, presence, and capability:** Therapists serve as a resonant witness for people's darkest places. Their soul speaks louder than words and their own personal journey through their dark places is something a super-sentient "little one" within the client knows and can feel. There is simply no more important task than for a therapist to have travelled the territory in some way or another.
- 2) **Specific skills and techniques:** Some of the best known skills in dealing with attachment issues include:
 - a. Getting gotten, keeping going until the client feels "gotten"
 - b. Kind eyes, a.k.a., nurturing attachment gaze
 - c. Welcome to the world exercise
 - d. Storytelling, metaphor stories, and images (especially of secure attachment)
 - e. Emphasizing consistency
 - f. Noticing caring behaviors
 - g. Helping clients find, maintain and stay with their sense of self when they are with another person
 - h. Increasing their sense of safety, including connecting with a competent protector
 - i. Helping them feel the empowerment of being a competent protector
 - j. Asking how their child within feels being protected by their adult self

Other skills include: building a relational field and safe container; somatic experiencing techniques of getting clients to feel implicit sensations in the body; repairing the relationship when it is broken or damaged; finding the sweet spot of "contact nutrition" that is enough but not so much that it overwhelms and triggers the client; excavating the wound and nourishing the secure attachment bond; triggering the attachment pattern so it can come to light and be worked with; clarifying the client's attachment survival strategy; empathizing with the suffering; noticing micro-movements of change, relaxation and integration; teaching clients how to self-regulate and co-regulate; using touch wisely; encouraging; honoring past survival strategies; and acknowledging hurt.

- 3) **Timing:** Knowing when to be quiet and when to use a skill is the final main tool for a therapist. Clients each have their own needs for connection and for space. They each have windows of opportunity that open, often opened by trust, crisis, and a combination of the two. Knowing when to enter, when to help slightly open the window, and when to open the window through honest feedback or conscious triggering are tools that comes from years of practice and wisdom.

Summary

What struck me most about this material is how accurate and helpful it was in understanding and naming my own process. As an identical twin separated into incubators at birth, attachment issues have always been a core issue for me though it took many years of uncovering to realize it.

We are relational beings who thrive on secure attachment. When our early attachment adaptive styles are less than secure, we unconsciously learn to adapt and this adaptive structure can guide our lives for many years out of sight and out of mind. Understanding our early attachment types can bring these unconscious patterns of feelings, sensations and behaviors that are buried in the psyche and in the intelligence of our body and its cells to light. The feeling of a secure attachment is indeed our birthright and it is possible for all of us.

Closing Discussion

Finally, I'd like to end this summary paper by commenting on and discussing a few ideas related to the work of developing attachment mastery with clients, especially those who are interested in their own spiritual development.

Relaxing vs. Dissociating

We all want to relax. We all want to find ourselves in a secure attachment system. It feels good; it brings out the best in us; and it lets our nervous system get nourished after experiencing the daily pressures of living. But relaxing in a full bodied and integrated way is really one of the most advanced skills a human can have. It's a hard thing to do. And, for those of us who hide un-owned parts of ourselves deep within the body, it can be awfully hard to do without running into rage and terror.

So, when a therapist works to get a client to relax and experience a secure attachment system, one must be very careful to know what is exactly needed at the time otherwise our efforts to get them to relax may actually be causing them to dissociate if the rage and terror are too much to feel. Too much too soon will cause a nervous system to shut down and in a survival effort, the person will split off that part which can't yet relax. The solution is timing and titration and going into the pain and then allowing the body-mind to naturally expand and relax.

Peter Levine has said that the antidote to anxiety is not relaxation but aggression. And it seems like therapists must be very attentive to a person's internal sense of being so that they know when to work to increase secure feelings and when to work with getting the person to feel the insecure feelings of anger and rage. My personal experience is that some therapists forget or aren't aware of the challenges of being asked to relax, or feel love, or feel someone's "gleam beam". At the wrong time, asking a person to relax or feel secure feelings will trigger rage or dissociation. And the key element seems to me readiness and permission—a person must be ready to feel and give permission to the therapist to enter into the insecure territory. Without these, therapy may be ineffective or even causing harm rather than reducing it.

Avoidant types may be relaxed in isolation but it is a false relaxation. Getting them to relax requires getting them to regain their faith in others through slow and steady efforts in secure attachment. Ambivalent types are hyper-vigilant and rarely relaxed. They are tense upon connecting and tense upon leaving. Getting them to relax rather than dissociate requires working to re-establish their sense of self in conjunction with having them feel the security of a consistent and reassuring connection. Disorganized types flip between extremes and are also rarely relaxed. Getting them to relax requires honoring the confusion they feel deep inside and slowly working to allow them to recognize and feel both extreme states slowly and carefully, while also re-building their sense of self.

In addition, therapists need to know when a client is resting securely in self-regulation, "resting securely" temporarily in isolation because they need to take a short break, or resting insecurely in isolation while deep down wanting someone to connect to. Because this process is subtle and invisible, it can be difficult to know where a client is and what they need. Too much talk or asking too many questions may be off-putting, and too little talk or not asking questions may be seen as not caring or clueless. Therapists need to do the best they can and use skillful attunement and gentle questioning to determine whether the client is dissociating out of fear or self-regulating in restful security.

Co-Regulation: Because Healing Happens in Relationship

Given the importance of attachment disruptions needing to heal in relationship, it seems vitally important to help clients find ways to develop secure relationships outside of therapy.

Therapists can begin to discuss with their clients ways to bring some of the awareness and some of the skills to their significant others—whether it be their spouse, partner, close friend or close family member—once the time is right and once they can take the risk of opening up to another. Once this has happened, a person can begin to openly or quietly practice co-regulation—through words, touch, eye contact and emotional responsiveness—where both people are aware of regulating themselves and the other person in ways that serve one's self and the other.

In essence, co-regulation is the healthy process of two people doing certain things that help connect each other when needed, provide space when needed, and repair a broken attachment, so that a secure attachment is felt most of the time.

Here are a few ideas to consider:

1. Ask clients to pay close attention to how their attachment system reacts around different intimate others. Whom do they feel safe opening up with? Do they feel safe when leaving that person? Do they ever feel confused and torn with that person?
2. Prepare the client for what to do when co-regulation doesn't go well, even before one starts to do it. Talk about how and where repair can happen.
3. See if clients can share some part of their attachment style and tendency with a person they feel close to. See if they can share what's hard for them. Have them practice speaking about micro-feelings, micro-thoughts and micro-sensations with the other person.

4. Then see if the client can share some self-regulating and co-regulating strategies with the other person, starting first with small, simple acts. Consider going through the list of secure attachment behaviors on page two of this paper and picking one or more to work with. Have them practice asking for what they need and then getting it.
5. If the friend or partner is more eager, consider reading the book Wired for Love by Stan Tatkin together and discussing it a little at a time. What is your partner or close friend's attachment style?
6. Have the client and their partner or intimate friend practice repair strategies. What has worked well? What do they personally like?
7. Lastly, see if the client can take the initiative in co-regulating without losing themselves in the process. Have them pay close attention to how they feel and if they can express how they feel to the other person as, or sometime after, it happens.

Co-regulation is a powerful way to heal and strengthen attachment bonds. The more it can happen in careful and loving awareness, the more likely it will be to succeed.

Attachment, Detachment and Spiritual Development

"Detachment from this world is not that you should own nothing, but that nothing should own you."

- Ali ibn abi Talib, (Sufi mystic and cousin of Muhammad)

Many spiritual traditions emphasize the importance of detachment—detaching from one's thoughts, feelings, possessions, and even one's family. While this may be a significant step in one's spiritual development if it's done too soon and without a secure attachment system deeply in place, it can be very problematic. And it can lead to what's commonly known as spiritual bypassing.

This topic is vast and has been discussed to some degree at length in certain circles but I feel it is important to bring it up in the field of attachment therapy, especially with clients who are spiritually inclined and have been taught about the practice of detachment. Simply put, asking a person to detach and attach at the same time can be quite confusing. But it is possible to do both with the proper understanding. Here is how I see it happening.

The purpose of detachment in spiritual development exists to allow a person to gently loosen the grasping tendency of the ego to identify with their thoughts, feelings, possessions and even family. It is meant to reorient one's consciousness from things to no-things, from some things to all things, from self to Self. But if one does this without an existing secure attachment system in place, a person will find themselves dissociating rather than truly detaching. A strong, healthy sense of self is needed before one takes the larger leap into letting go of the self into the Self.

Spiritual bypassing can occur when a person detaches from difficult thoughts and feelings without having done the hard work of experiencing them fully before one detaches from them.

As one spiritual teacher has said, "you can't renounce something you never had." So, true spiritual development requires that a person experience the difficult feelings and thoughts that arise from an insecure attachment system before they can detach from them otherwise one may dissociate or bypass instead of detach. In the words of Ken Wilber, the process of spiritual development is about transcending and including, or in this context, including and transcending and including. In other words, detachment is not about splitting off, rather it is about expanding and loosening one's grip on certain things.

In a related way, the term containment, used to describe how a client can hold a very difficult feeling, can be as confusing to a client as the term detachment can be. Containment easily has the connotation of holding something together in a restricted environment when what a client most wants to do is to allow certain feelings to expand so they can be fully felt and released. How can a client release something that is being contained? Therapists need to carefully explain the term so clients don't get confused and angry like I did.

As I understand it, containment is the careful, loving and gentle holding of a feeling or state so that the person can feel safe enough to feel everything inside them. The holding expands infinitely as needed. There is no sense of repression. It allows and holds at the same time.

Both attachment and containment are relational. And this is the rub, for in many spiritual traditions the end point of union is non-relational. One realizes only an empty fullness of Being, of Infinite Love that simply Is without second. Getting to this state may require passing through the dark night of the soul and realizing that there is no relationship, even with the Divine—there is only Being. Developing a secure attachment is an important part of the path of human and spiritual development. In the end, a secure attachment is really, and has always only ever been, an attachment with, or better stated a oneness with, Self.

The Value of Suffering

"Privation and suffering alone can open the mind of a man to all that is hidden to others."

- Igjugarjuk Caribou Eskimo shaman

In addition to teaching the value of detachment, spiritual traditions around the world also speak about the value of suffering in developing spiritually. Suffering has a way of focusing the mind and heart on God or some Higher Power like no other. Suffering often can do this so much more effectively than comfort and happiness can.

So, what does this mean for developing a secure attachment system that brings comfort and security to a person? Essentially, it means that therapists need to remember that someone's suffering may be a sacred opportunity. It means that one shouldn't try to run away from pain and an insecure attachment system too quickly before gathering the hidden gems within.

Most therapists are trained to help clients find internal and external resources within to be able to move away from their suffering. They teach clients to resource themselves in times of pain

and discomfort, to find strength and allies in the face of weakness and demons. But in my experience, and when a client has a spiritual focus, there may be greater value in going further into the pain, in staying with it longer. Learning to stay with a very uncomfortable feeling and let it unfold or melt on its own is critically important. The move away from pain should primarily be client centered, without having a therapist prematurely guide them into the light and warmth of secure attachment.

Perhaps therapists do use this but when I hear the statement that a therapist should "drain the energy out of the trigger" it gives the impression that the primary purpose is to disarm the trigger without seeing if there is any other value to experiencing the darkness. Perhaps a better statement would be that one should "tap into what's inside and behind the trigger".

In my experience there is a sweet spot which holds one's pain and one's joy, one's insecurity and one's security. And, for much of my own therapy, this sweet spot was often a razor's edge—a very fine line that was treacherous not only for myself but also for the therapist. But once I found it and could stay with it, it became an "exquisite suffering", a suffering that also held unbearable joy.

The point here is that therapists working with attachment issues also need to remember that attachment wounds are sacred wounds. They are there also to serve. Broken hearts allow light to come in, if only one can take the time to feel the light coming from the darkness.

Eben Alexander, M.D., author of the book Proof of Heaven quotes the 17th century Christian poet Henry Vaughan when speaking about this place, "*There is, some say, in God a deep but dazzling darkness...*". In Dr. Alexander's own experience it was "an inky darkness that was also full to brimming with light."² And from this place, he "heard" and "knew" these words, the ultimate words in a secure attachment:

*You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever.
You have nothing to fear.
There is nothing you can do wrong.*

We must remember the value of suffering in our work with clients. We must hold ourselves back from trying to help someone out of the mire too soon, from working to resource a person before the gem has been reached. And, in all cases this should be done by listening to the client...and listening to their deepest desire.

² Proof of Heaven, Eben Alexander, p. 48