

The Role of Emotions in a Lifetime of Practice

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The great contemporary Chan master, Venerable Master Xuyun, revived Chinese Buddhism during a time of great turmoil and difficulty. Even at a young age, he was strict in self-discipline, austere in practice, and displayed an unwavering resolve. The pictures of him show a composed Buddhist monk completely at peace and in control of his senses. But his autobiography shows us another side of him. It shows us a person with very human emotional responses: shame, admiration, profound gratitude, joy, and at times even distress to the point of tears. These responses raise a question: How do his emotions make sense given the Buddhist teachings that to become free of the cycle of birth and death, one must let go of emotions, often expressed in a four character Chinese phrase, *duan yu qu ai* (斷欲去愛), literally translated as “cut off desire and cast out love”?¹ Are VM Xuyun’s experiences inconsistent with the Buddha’s teachings? I will explore this question by investigating: (1) the Buddhist concepts of desire, love, and emotion, (2) the emotional relationships VM Xuyun left behind when he ran away from home to become a monk, and (3) his later transformation of these relationships—especially his relationship with his parents—through spiritual practice.

Defining Desire, Love, and Emotions

The first layer of misunderstanding around emotions in Buddhism can be addressed by clarifying the definition of the terms *yu*, “desire,” and *ai*, “love.”² In English, these words have a large range of meanings. For instance, the word “desire” can be used when speaking of a desire to seek material gain but might also be used to speak of an aspiration for awakening and

¹ The translation of “cut off” and “cast out” leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of the process of self-cultivation; namely, by cutting off one’s humanity, one loses access to a deep reservoir of information and inspiration for one’s practice. A better translation might be “let go of craving and lust.”

² In fact, the Chinese words themselves can also be misleading as well. *Ai* (愛), similar to “love,” ranges from emotional attachment, to a mother’s care for a child, to unconditional care for humanity. Possibly a reason for the misunderstanding of the term in English coming from the Chinese is because it is already vague in the Chinese.

goodness. The word “love” can be used to mean a form of lust or universal care for all. Moreover, “emotion” comes from the Latin *emovere* where *e* (out) + *movere* (move) (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). Therefore, emotion has the sense of “moving out,” “agitation,” or an internal stirring that is often in contrast to reason and the intellect. In everyday usage, emotions include everything along the spectrum from sorrow and grief to joy and happiness. Hence, all three words point to a broad range of potential meanings.

To address this vagueness, a better translation of *yu* and *ai* might be “craving” and “lust,” which reflects their Sanskrit equivalents, *tṛṣṇā* and *rāga* more accurately. *Tṛṣṇā* literally means “thirst” and is introduced by the Buddha in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* as being the origin of *dukkha*, “suffering,” the experience of never being satisfied. He continues to explain that *tṛsna* takes on three forms: craving for sensual pleasure (*kāma*), existence (*bhava*), or non-existence (*vibhava*) (*In the Buddha’s Words* 75-78). The first form of craving will be addressed in the discussion on *rāga* later. The second form, craving for existence, feeds the cycle of birth and death as living beings crave for renewed existence in *samsāra*. The last form, craving for non-existence, is a wish for annihilation that rejects existence.³

Rāga, translated as “lust,” is similar to the first *tṛṣṇā*, “craving sensual pleasure.” At the coarsest level it manifests as sexual desire; at a more subtle level, it refers to an “underlying tendency to lust for pleasurable feeling” (*In the Buddha’s Words* 31-32). In the *Dart Sutta*, the Buddha compares an ordinary person of the world with a trained noble disciple. After an ordinary person is struck by the first dart (physical pain), he experiences the second dart, (mental suffering and anguish). The noble disciple, on the other hand, although he too experiences pain,

³ The Buddha’s teaching that “craving for non-existence” is a cause for suffering is more evidence that he is not teaching that human feeling should be rejected or “cut off.” Instead, he is offering a methodology that leads to freedom that comes from constant mindfulness of internal feelings guided by wisdom.

does not react. According to the Buddha, what makes the noble disciple different is that he experiences the first dart of physical pain without being averse to pain or seeking pleasure and is then not hit by the second dart, the mental afflictions. The real work of cultivation is in the letting go of the underlying tendency of lust.

Speaking of emotions generally, Buddhism broadly categorizes them into two groups: liberating emotions and entangling emotions. For instance, three skillful mental qualities given in Yogācāra clearly have an emotional dimension, such as trust (*śraddhā*), conscience (*hrī*), and sense of shame (*apatrāpya*). The sense of shame that arises when one does harm produces an internal stirring; however, this feeling, although potentially unsettling, is useful feedback and should be heeded and developed. On the other hand, Yogācāra also lists many unskillful mental qualities which are obstacles to spiritual growth, such as lust (*rāga*), hatred (*pratigha*), pride (*māna*), and jealousy (*īrasyā*). These qualities also stir the heart in a way that entangles it in more confusion. Because of this, Yogācāra masters encourage us to let go of them. In Buddhism, then, emotions are to be reflected on with wisdom and cultivated appropriately. General statements such as “all emotions are bad” or, even worse, “all emotions need to be cut off” can lead a practitioner astray thinking that they are supposed to not feel anything.

Renouncing the Family

Leaving the family life to enter the monastic Sangha seems to be the most drastic act of “cutting off” emotions and human relationships. Fundamental relationships, such as those with parents and with spouses and children are torn asunder. Parents grieve; wives lament; children cry. To his family, the aspiring monastic seems cold and heartless. He seems to be abandoning his family to pursue his or her own aspirations. VM Xuyun is a case in point. At nineteen, he ran away from two wives, a stepmother, and a father, all of whom were deeply attached to him.

From Chinese society's perspective, VM Xuyun's decision to leave home is unfilial and irresponsible. He did not fulfill his responsibilities as a son, especially that of carrying on the family line. He did not care for the emotional needs of his wives, but left them at a very young age without bearing them any children—he had no intimate relationships with them, but remained completely celibate (*Empty Cloud: The Autobiography of the Chinese Zen Master, Hsu Yun* 22). At nineteen, VM Xuyun was completely provided for by his family and displayed all the external signs of worldly success. He was smart and intelligent, belonged to a wealthy household, and had two wives of good family, but he left it all to become a monk. He clearly had a different set of values.

These values can be seen in VM Xuyun's poem for his wives when he leaves them at nineteen:

Once there is birth, death then will follow; everyone knows this.
Why moan and gripe?
For wives and riches, for heir and fortune, you ruin your future.
It's all due to anger and greed.
For what sort of profit, for what kind of fame have I wasted nineteen springs? [...]

Much more should we, in the Dharma's demise,
Fraught with anguish and difficulties,
Now strive to be like those of old in search of our enlightenment.⁴

(“Song of Skin Bag” BTTS Translation)

The above passages show the motivations for his departure: 1) a recognition of the impermanence of life; 2) a feeling that worldly success (wealth, fame, marriage) was meaningless; and 3) a wish to emulate the ancient sages and inspire others to do likewise. He is not leaving the household in order to reject his wives or family, but instead, sees the fleeting and

⁴ 有了生。必有死。人人曉得莫嘸呻。為妻財。為子祿。
誤了前程是貪瞋。為甚名。為甚利。虛度光陰十九春。 [...]
況末劫。甚艱苦。如何不悟古人比。（“皮袋歌”）

unsatisfactory nature of worldly existence and wants to find a way out. In a way, he is looking out for their ultimate well-being. Separation is a fact of life; where there birth, there is death. But he wants to find a way out, and he leaves a poem for his wives hoping that they will seek liberation as well.

Oftentimes a different cultural perspective sheds light on some hidden assumptions within another cultural framework. Compared to traditional Chinese society, modern America values give children much more freedom and independence in choosing their path in life. The expectation that kids will live out their parents' dreams and carry on the "family line" is much less. Deborah Metcalf, the mother of an American Buddhist monk, Rev. Heng Sure, writes in an article about her son: "I know he will never marry or give me grandchildren, which is disappointing, but he is influencing many more children than he ever would as a father. It makes him happier than anyone I know, and I can honestly say I am proud that my son is a Buddhist ("Letter from a Proud Mother")." She has come to accept her son's chosen path in life and can also accept that he will not be having children. She would like grandchildren but is not terribly grieved—there is a sense that she has let go of that expectation and transformed it into seeing the influence Rev. Heng Sure has had on other children and the happiness it brings him. In the end, the real spirit of leaving home does not negate filial duty, but elevates and enlarges it.

Transforming Emotion through Spiritual Practice

After leaving home, VM Xuyun lived and practiced on his own in the mountains for a number of years. In order to hide from his father's scouts, he spent three years in hiding practicing repentance (23). He was then told to come out and serve in the monastery, but after four years of service, he felt that the work was hindering his practice, and he decided to strike out on his own again to practice in seclusion in the mountains (24). His inspiration came from his

admiration of DM Xuanzang who went through great “austerities to reach his goal,” and VM Xuyun reflects on himself: “Who am I that I should not follow his example?” (26).

VM Xuyun, modeling himself on the great masters of old, wanted to let go of all physical comforts and attachments and follow an ascetic way of life. However, his understanding of what he was doing was transformed unexpectedly. At thirty-one, he meets a Chan monk who praises him and requests the Dharma from him. VM Xuyun has an emotional response to this. In his autobiography he says, “I felt very ashamed at this and replied, ‘My knowledge is shallow, for as yet I have had no chance to call on learned Masters (27).’”

As discussed before, a sense of shame is a skillful mental quality that can guide one on the path. Here VM Xuyun’s sense of shame causes him to reflect on his own understanding and realize that although he is living a peaceful existence as an ascetic, he has no Dharma to share. He is possibly embarrassed by the praise from the monk because he knows that it is not warranted. It is noteworthy that VM Xuyun did not respond with negative emotions such as greed, pride, deceit, and shamelessness. He was not greedy for praise or prideful of his accomplishments. He also did not pretend to understand the Dharma or repress his conscience. Any of these could have made this moment of turning into a moment of hardening.

VM Xuyun could have responded: “Yes, I’m quite accomplished, and have a great deal to teach. Have you heard of the poem I wrote at nineteen, ‘Song of the Skin Bag’?” Instead, his response comes from a place of humility and openness. He may have developed these traits through his practice of repentance and reform—a practice which can help us recognize our faults and become more attuned to our conscience.

The Chan monk sends him to DM Yangjing who skillfully helps VM Xuyun widen the scope of his aspirations. Knowing that VM Xuyun is trying to emulate the ancients, DM Yangjing asks: “You know that the ancients disciplined their bodies, but do you know they also disciplined their minds?” (28). Adeptly, DM Yangjing is helping VM Xuyun clarify and expand the scope of his vows. DM Yangjing does not tell him to renounce his vows to be like the ancients; instead, he asks VM Xuyun to reflect more carefully on the practices of the ancients and to follow them more truly, presenting to him as worthy of emulation both their external austerities and their internal attitude towards cultivation. The great masters of the past realized enlightenment not by fleeing the world but by teaching and transforming living beings in the world (28).

This instruction seems to be a turning point for VM Xuyun, particularly in the transformative effect it has on his emotions and his attitude towards his family. Repaying the debt of gratitude to his parents becomes one of his primary motivations in cultivation. At forty-three, he vows to go on a bowing pilgrimage to Putuo and then to Mount Wutai so as to dedicate the merit to his parents. This begins a three-year journey during which he endures a great deal of hardship and almost loses his life twice (35-49). At one point, a beggar, Wenji, urges him to renounce his vow to go on pilgrimage to Mount Wutai. VM Xuyun’s response is quite moving:

When I was born I did not see my mother, who died at childbirth. I was my father’s only son but I fled from him and because of that, he resigned his post and this shortened his life. As my parents’ love for me was as boundless as heaven is vast. I have been unhappy about this business for several decades. Thus, I vowed to go on pilgrimage to Mount Wu-tai to pray for Manjusri Bodhisattva to protect them and deliver them from suffering so that they can secure birth in the Pure Land as soon as possible. However, many difficulties there are to face, I must reach the holy site for it would be better to die than to fail in fulfilling my vow (41-42).

VM Xuyun clearly feels deep sadness for having caused his parents' suffering. He acknowledges his responsibility in his father's short life and also recognizes that he has not repaid his parents' love and care for him. VM Xuyun clearly has a deep concern for his parents' welfare. VM Xuyun's chosen method of practice is a bowing pilgrimage, but this is just the external form. In his heart he is dedicating merit to his parents and praying for their deliverance.

Even after, at fifty-six, VM Xuyun awakens at a Chan session at Gaomin Monastery, he does not forget about his parents, but maintains his aspiration to repay the kindness of his mother (67-69). At fifty-eight, he reflects:

When I was born, I lost my mother whom I never saw. I only saw her picture at home and each time I thought of her, my heart broke. Previously I had taken a vow to go to Ashoka (A Yu Wang) Monastery in order to revere the Buddha's relics and to burn off a finger there as an offering to the Buddha for the liberation of my affectionate mother (69).⁵

VM Xuyun does not cut his emotional ties with his mother even after his profound awakening experience. While at Ashoka Monastery sitting in Chan meditation, he has a vision of himself flying on a dragon, from which he can see his mother below, in a beautiful palace. He tells her to ride the dragon to the Western Pure Land (69). He comments, "This was the only time in my life that I saw my mother (70)." Later, VM Xuyun falls ill, and the chief monk then tries to discourage VM Xuyun from offering his finger. At this point, VM Xuyun bursts into tears and says, "Who can escape from death? I want to repay my debt of gratitude to my mother and took a vow to burn off a finger. Why should I live if I have to cancel my decision at this point? I am ready to die (71)." VM Xuyun does not fit the common misconception that an awakened Chan master has exterminated all feelings and desires and is cold and aloof. His austere demeanor hides an inner sensitivity that seems deeply connected to his human roots. We can see from this

⁵ 予以生而無母。未見慈容。僅於在家時睹真儀耳。每思之。輒覺心痛。夙願往阿育王寺。禮舍利。燃指供佛。超度慈親。

that awakening to the Way does not mean cutting off emotional relationships. What awakening does is transform these relationships, so that, ceasing to be karmic impediments, they become a source of inspiration for Dharma practice.

Even at the age of 120, VM Xuyun's grief for his mother is still present. Here his response to his disciples who hope to celebrate his birthday:

I am like a candle in the wind and have achieved nothing; when I think of this I am ashamed of my empty reputation. A century of worldly troubles is like a dream and an illusion and is not worth any attachment. Moreover, since birth leads to death, a wise man should be on the alert and set his mind on the Dao, like one who loses no time to save his burning head. How can I indulge in following a worldly custom? I thank you for your kindness from the bottom of my heart but sincerely regret that I am unable to accept your present. I still grieve over the untimely death of my mother and would request that you stop this unprofitable plan to celebrate my birthday in order not to aggravate my sins (276-277).

For VM Xuyun, his birthday is not a day of celebration of his accomplishments, but rather a reminder that his coming into life brought about his mother's death. He uses his grief over his mother's death as an opportunity to teach filiality and impermanence to his disciples. He dismisses his own life achievements, possibly again as a teaching in non-attachment. At the same time, his response is very respectful and compassionate: he thanks them for their kind thoughts, but ultimately does not accept their offer to celebrate his birthday. VM Xuyun gently asks his disciples to redirect their reverence for him towards their own cultivation. He does not give into worldly customs, but uses them as a means towards liberation for all. In essence, if his disciples truly want to celebrate his birthday, each of them should "be on the alert and set his mind on the Dao, like one who loses no time to save his burning head." His response is reminiscent of the Buddha's final instructions in the *Maha-parinibbana Sutta*:

Yet it is not thus [making offerings of flowers and music], Ananda, that the Tathagata is respected, venerated, esteemed, worshipped, and honored in the highest degree. But, Ananda, whatever bhikkhu or bhikkhuni, layman or laywoman, abides by the Dhamma,

lives uprightly in the Dhamma, walks in the way of the Dhamma, it is by such a one that the Tathagata is respected, venerated, esteemed, worshipped, and honored in the highest degree. Therefore, Ananda, thus should you train yourselves: “We shall abide by the Dhamma, live uprightly in the Dhamma, walk in the way of the Dhamma.”

The Buddha and VM Xuyun both seem to be using emotional feeling as a skillful teaching-tool for their disciples. They have transformed the emotions in themselves into conditions to support awakening, and now they are leading others to do the same for themselves.

VM Xuyun’s lifetime of practice shows that emotions play a role in the path of awakening. He has many emotional responses: admiration for the ancient masters, gratitude towards his parents, shame at his own shortcomings, sorrow for the pain he caused his parents, care for the ultimate well-being of others, and courage to live by his vows even when faced with death. However, he does renounce the emotions that are not conducive to awakening such as craving (*trṣṇā*) and lust (*rāga*), which are the causes for continual existence in the cycle of birth and death. Emotions, then, are not bad in and of themselves. They must be examined carefully to see where they lead. When directed towards the proper goal, they can be useful.

How then should a practitioner deal with his or her emotions? There are a number of possible lessons that come from VM Xuyun’s life story. (1) Emotions first must be identified as liberating or as entangling. (2) We should not blindly follow the expectations of society, culture, and family as they often reinforce emotional entanglement. (3) Walking the path does not mean ignoring our feelings—in fact, our conscience and sense of shame are guides on the path. (4) Recognizing the kindness of others, especially parents, is a source of inspiration for spiritual growth. And finally, (5) emotions are not to be “cut off,” but rather used to teach and transform living beings, both internal ones (our afflictions) and external ones (those whom we have affinities with). VM Xuyun’s life serves as an example to guide us. He devoted his life to

following the example of ancient sages, and we now can follow him, or better yet, we can follow the Dharma that his life points to.

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