

# Balancing Joining and Separation

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## Introduction

There is a natural balance within us all between the desire for joining and the desire for separation, between the desire for closeness and the desire for distance.

These two great themes – joining and separation – are central to human life. Almost everyone wants both of them, to varying degrees.

People tend to focus a lot on the joining theme, both because relationships are about – uh – joining, and because spiritual practice of any kind is fundamentally about coming into relationship with things.

Into relationship with our own suffering and that of others, and into relationship with the real causes of that suffering. Into relationship with the endlessly changing and thus impermanent nature of existence and experience. Into mindful relationship with the body, with the sense of experience being pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, with all the thoughts and feelings etc, in the mind, and with the qualities and aims of consciousness itself. And – it's meaningful to you – into relationship with a transcendental Something: God, Buddhanature, the Infinite, unbounded Awareness . . . by whatever name.

But as important as relationship is, it is also important to bow to the other great theme, separation.

## The Benefits of Separation

First, a healthy capacity for separation – or, using other words, for differentiation, individuation, autonomy, and self-expression – is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for healthy joining. As the saying goes: fences make for good neighbors.

Second, autonomy is necessary for spiritual practice. Let's consider these examples from Buddhism:

- One is always to “see for yourself,” and make your own decisions about what makes sense to you in the teachings of the Buddha.
- It is fundamentally up to oneself, and no one else, to engage the path of practice. No one can make us do it; we have to choose it ourselves. While Buddhism does not speak against God, it does not assert that God shapes our lives and that God's grace is at work in our transformation.

- We are each individually responsible for the effects of our actions – for our own karmas. Buddhism is a very gentle religion/philosophy/whatever-it-is, but it is also bluntly tough-minded.

Much as separation supports joining, experiences of healthy connection, particularly in childhood, are critical for the development of healthy self structures, ego functions, and sense of worth and confidence. By taking refuge in our feelings of connection – both present in our relationships of the moment as well as internalized from our history of relationships – we are able to move out, from a secure base, to explore and cope with the world as an individual.

For instance, in Buddhism, one of what are called the Three Jewels of practice is the Refuge of Sangha – which means the community of fellow practitioners.

### **Mutual Support**

In other words: individuality and relationship, autonomy and intimacy, separation and joining *support* each other. They are often seen at odds with each other, but this is so not the case!

For example, by knowing that you are entitled to your own view of reality, that you can assert yourself appropriately, that you can disengage when you need to, that you can honor your temperament if you happen to be an introvert who is a little drained by contact and fed by solitude – then you can be more comfortable and willing to enter into the depths of joining and intimacy available in relationships, plus receive the supplies anyone needs for healthy individuation, including the attention and caring and esteem of others.

Similarly, by acknowledging, and normalizing, and respecting the need for separation and distance in others – even if it is sometimes not your preference – that helps create a zone of safety which often fosters a greater willingness to hang out for a while with closeness.

In fact, people often step back in relationships – like agreeing, perhaps tacitly, to just not talk about certain contentious topics – in order to stay close. In developmental psychology, the term is “distance in the service of attachment.”

### **Working out Different Desires for Closeness**

Of course, in important relationships there is rarely a perfect symmetry of desires for joining and separation. That just means that it is important to be alert to the other person’s hot buttons: for many people, if they feel their autonomy is being challenged, then that pops to the top of the stack as the key issue on the table for

them . . . while for many other people, the same is true regarding perceived threats to joining. By taking into account the “imperative” of the other person, you can skillfully prevent unnecessary conflicts; by explaining your own imperatives in relationships, you can help the other person understand you better.

Additionally, the natural differences between people in the priorities they give to joining compared to separation, and the differences in the ways in which they pursue those aims, are simply another thing – albeit an important one – to negotiate in relationships.

Being able to accept and own your personal joining/separation “thermostat setting” will help you to talk about it more straightforwardly and effectively with others. And you will be as able as possible to accept and work nimbly with that set point in others.

### **Natural Cautions about Closeness**

Most psychological wounds or traumas occur in the context of relationships, including in early childhood. Further, in our evolutionary history, there were a lot of risks in encounters with people who were “not-my-tribe.” So it is natural to be a little leery of interacting at first, especially with relative strangers.

To enter into connections today with other flesh-and-blood people, and with your internal history and sense of relationships, it is skillful to be sensitive and caring toward your own alarm bells and nervousness and resistance.

It is natural to bump into those “defenses,” often subtly. It is inevitable if you are opening up, becoming more available for relationship, more accessible, more engaged, more heartfelt, more loving.

Even as you read those words, you might be aware of both the longing for those qualities in your relationships and a certain . . . squeamishness perhaps? reluctance? anxiety? repulsion??! . . . coming up as well.

It is perfectly natural. The closer we get, often the more the impulse to distance arises – just like the more distance we get, often the more the impulse to move closer arises.

As you go through life, first and foremost, just try to bring mindfulness to these states of mind, both the longing for closeness and the desire for distance. They are a wonderful object of mindfulness and even investigation.

In accord with true mindfulness, try to maintain an accepting interest, even a kind of soft friendliness, toward the closeness and toward the distancing.

And really, if the instinct toward stepping back feels wise, or is simply too strong to push through, then please by all means follow it, and step back.