

Keep what you cannot lose

Renowned social psychologist and humanist philosopher, Erich Fromm (1900-1980), writes in his book, *To Have or To Be*, "If I am what I have, and if I lose what I have, then what am I?" Nobody, Fromm answers, but a defeated, deflated, pathetic testimony to a wrong way of living (1976:89).

"To have" almost always is related to something external to us. We might say: I have a family, friends, books, a car, money, and so on. We can also "have" beauty, fame, power, greed, hate, delusion, and other intangibles. In this latter case, there is a sense that these qualities are not really "us," even though we can say "I *am* beautiful, famous, powerful, greedy, hateful, deluded..." There is a pervading sense of impermanence about them.

When we say we "have" something, at least two important implications immediately arise. It is not really a part of us. We might "have" them but they *are* not really "us." We might try to identify with them, but we would be at odds with them sooner or later. We are capable of losing what we have, as it is not really an integral part of our being (like "I *am* truly happy"). Most importantly, we can only *enjoy* what we have – it brings us true joy – when we use it in a wholesome way. In this sense, we can only "own" what we enjoy. The point is that we can only "be" something or "use" something.

We came with nothing into this world; we take nothing with us when we depart. That is as far as "things" go. In other words, we do not really have any true power over what we have. Buddhism teaches us to look deeper into what it means to "have" and to "be." Let us now free these words from the pages and see them with our hearts.

The Buddha teaches us to *give away what we cannot keep* so that *we become what we really are*. This may sound like a wordplay, but let us take these letters and words to be musical notes and phrases, and simply feel them. Early Buddhism is a teaching about wholesome feelings: being happy is a feeling; so is love.

What is it that we cannot keep? What is that we do not have until we give it away? It is love. We can only be loved when we love others. Love is not love until we give it away. To love another is to unconditionally accept that person or being. Friendship begins when we unconditionally accept this other person or being, but we do not stop there.

Love is not love unless you show it. We best show love by first feeling it in our hearts. Then we are able to show or say this love to another.

What is "love"? There are animal love, human love and divine love. Animal love is merely the desire for things, such as the physical body. But the body changes and decays, and our desire soon turns into disgust. Animal love is grasping and collecting with almost no giving. It is exploitative (seeing others as objects) and, hence, it is not healthy.

Human love, on a simple level is friendly love, a desire and willingness to communicate and learn with others in a positive manner. Human love inspires us to share what we have and to give to others. By patiently listening to others, we allow them to see themselves more fully and joyfully: this is the gift of time. By comforting others we remove their fears: this is the gift of fearlessness.

Divine love is an ability and willingness to see goodness in others and bring about mutual and active joy. Divine love is more than merely giving what we *have*: we give others what we *are*. Being happy, we wish others well and happy, too. It begins with a single thought. Being compassionate, we reach out to the less fortunate. We show kindness to others even when they do not deserve it. Being appreciative, we joyfully celebrate the fortunes and goodness of others.

Being equanimous, we see success and failure as the sides of the same coin: so too praise and blame; fame and obscurity. We see joy and sorrow as defining one another.

We live with lovingkindness, compassion, and appreciative joy, but there are still those whose hearts remain untouched and unmoved. For the moment, let us accept things as they are, as we have done our best. So we calmly await new opportunities for showing love.

Just as we are touched and moved by the kindness and love of others, they too would sooner or later be similarly moved. Plant the seeds of love and water them with virtue and patience.

Love is something we can neither have nor own because it is an active appreciation of self and other. In time, we begin to see others as being no different from us, and the self-and-other wall is broken down.

When we show love, we are giving what we are. If we want to be loved, we must first show that love. When we feel love in this way, we have something we cannot lose. We will never lose the memory and power of such a joy. Those we love are impermanent and subject to change; they might even leave us forever one day. But our happiness about them remains forever with us.

Give what we cannot keep; get what we cannot lose. This is the beginning of Buddhist living and practice.

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