

## Buddhist love training<sup>1</sup>

Generally, love refers to a wide range of feelings, states and attitudes, ranging from pleasure ("I love the countryside"), to interpersonal attraction ("I love you"); or from infatuation, to sexual desire; or on a higher dimension, from joyful faith to an overwhelming sense of selfless union with one's object of faith.

Ancient Greek philosophy gives us a helpful hierarchy of love, distinguishing at least five levels, that is: *eros*, *storge*, *philia*, *xenia*, and *agape*. **Eros** is erotic or passionate love, that is, sensual desire and longing. In Greek philosophy, although *eros* is basically physical love, an attraction to the body of a person, on a deeper level it is the basis for an appreciation of the person's inner beauty, or even an appreciation of beauty itself.

*Eros*, in other words, moves us to recall knowledge of beauty, which in turn spurs us on towards an understanding of spiritual truth. Philosophers, artists, poets, the creative and those in love, are all inspired to seek beauty and truth by *eros*. In other words, this is the underlying spirit in the physical or literary expression of beauty and truth, at least on the worldly level. The Buddhist counterpart of *eros* would be *kāma*, sensual pleasure.

On a less physical but more selfless level, there is **storge**, which is natural affection, like that felt by parents for their offspring, especially a mother's love for her child. This is very close, even a synonym, for example, for the Japanese emotion of *amae*, roughly translated as "indulgent dependence," which is close to the Malay emotion of *manja* (which basically means "pampered").

**Philia** is a less passionate, more virtuous love, such as found in friendship, brotherhood, or generally non-sexual affection, including loyalty to friends, family, and community. It entails virtue, equality, reciprocity and familiarity, that is of mutual benefit. In an important way, especially amongst the learned, this is an attraction of minds, of the love of learning or of sharing the same or similar vision of life. The Buddhist counterpart of *philia* is *pema*, worldly love, not amounting to *kāma*.

On a broader, more inclusive, level, we have **xenia**, "guest friendship," "ritualized friendship" or hospitality,<sup>2</sup> which was a hallmark of ancient Greek culture, and in the ancient civilized world as a whole, even in the Far East. It was a sort of ritualized friendship between a host and his guest, even on their first meeting. The host would feed and provide quarters for the guest, who was expected to show his gratitude. The importance of *xenia* recurs constantly in Greek mythology,<sup>3</sup> especially Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The Buddhist counterpart to *xenia* would be *paṭisanthāra*.

During the time of Plato (424/423-348/347 BCE) and other ancient western writers, **agape** have been used in various forms to denote the love for a spouse or family, or

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Piya Tan, "Love: A Buddhist perspective," SD 38.4.

<sup>2</sup> Cf "respect for hospitality," *paṭisanthāra, gāravatā*: (**Upagantabba**) **Kula S** (A 9.17) @ SD 37.11 (7).

<sup>3</sup> In the Ovid's fable of the aged couple, **Philemon and Baucis**, Zeus Xenios ("of the travellers") and Hermes (Roman: Jupiter and Mercury), disguised as peasants, were turned away by everyone else in the town, except the aged couple, who feasted the duo. Zeus then instructed them to retreat to a hill-top while he flooded and drowned the whole town (*Metamorphoses* 8.611-724):

[http://www.mythology.us/ovid\\_metamorphoses\\_book\\_8.htm](http://www.mythology.us/ovid_metamorphoses_book_8.htm)

affection for a particular activity, in contrast to *philia* (an affection denoting friendship, brotherhood or generally non-sexual affection) and *eros*, sexual attraction. In Christianity, it usually refers to God's fatherly love for man, and man's reciprocal love for God, which is also extended to one's fellow men (but not all beings, as in Buddhism). *Agape*, as such, is close to the Buddhist *mettā*, which, as unconditional lovingkindness, embracing all things, and spiritually much more inclusive than *agape*.

Early Buddhism turns on love, and it does so on three wholesome levels, that is, in terms of the three trainings (*sikkhā*).<sup>4</sup> Buddhist training begins with love and respect for *others*, practised and expressed through moral virtue, that is, keeping to the five precepts by the laity and to monastic discipline by renunciants. This basic level of loving respect is expressed through the body and speech.

We communicate with each other through speech and body language. When both of these means of social communication are well regulated and tempered with love and respect, it becomes the lifeblood of a wholesome community and society. The most important benefit of such an environment is that it is a vital foundation for mental cultivation, that is, the development of the heart.

On a social level, this makes possible for us to be in touch with the depths of our creativity so that we can express beauty and truth in various ways. Buddhist aesthetics, in other words, is rooted in the calm and clarity of our hearts, and find expression through our six senses: the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind. We create works that are visually beautiful, music and sounds that are harmonious, aromas that refresh, foods that nourish, touches that heal, and thoughts that inspire and awaken us.

On a spiritual level, a calm and clear heart is the basis for personal development. A calm heart rises above and beyond the prison of words to directly feel what our heart/mind really is. We rise above the personal grammar of duality to feel the all-embracing, boundless space of ineffable bliss. When all the existential dust has settled, our mind's eye sees with greater clarity the true nature of our being.

Having emerged from such thought-free spaciousness, we must simply spill over with a zest for conveying its bliss and clarity in words and ways that awaken the slumbering world. The beauty and truth that we variously convey in our actions and speech would surely somehow inspire others to realize that they, too, are capable of such a blissful and liberating awakening. This is the spirit of Buddhist mental training.

Ultimately, the disciplined self and the liberated heart open the door to wisdom training. All that beauty and truth that we have tasted for ourselves begin to be expressed in communicable ways through our speech and actions. It is a profound wisdom that sees how the love for bodies and persons can only be ephemeral and unsatisfactory. We begin to understand that love is not taking but giving; not seeking attention, but giving it; more than the dead past or the absent future, it is the eternal present. We realize that true love is our presence in every sense of the word.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On the 3 trainings, see *Sīla samādhi paññā* = SD 21.6. See also *Kāma-c, chanda* = SD 32.2 (3.2).

<sup>5</sup> Further see, Piya Tan, "The greatest love," *Simply Joys 2: Healing Words*, 2011:96-98 (ch 33).