

## When self-love is good<sup>1</sup>

**HOW SELF-LOVE CAN BE HEALTHY.** **Erich Fromm**, in his instructive essay, “Selfishness and self-love” (1939), writes that we often mistake self-love for selfishness.<sup>2</sup> His essay opens with these words:

“Modern culture is pervaded by a taboo on selfishness. It teaches that to be selfish is sinful and that to love others is virtuous. To be sure, this doctrine is not only in flagrant contradiction to the practices of modern society but it also is in opposition to another set of doctrines which assumes that the most powerful and legitimate drive in man is selfishness and that each individual by following this imperative drive also does the most for the common good.” (1997:163)

Selfishness, as commonly used in such ideologies, is more or less synonymous with self-love. Hence, says Fromm, the alternatives are either to love others, which is a virtue, or to love oneself, which is a “sin.” Fromm further notes,

“This principle has found its classic expression in Calvin’s theology.<sup>3</sup> Man is essentially bad and powerless. He can do nothing – absolutely nothing – good on the basis of his own strength or merit. ‘We are not our own,’ says Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1536] (Calvin 1928, Book 3, 619), ‘therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberation and actions.... On the contrary, we are God’s; to him, therefore, let us live and die. For, as it is the most devastating pestilence which ruins people if they obey themselves, it is the only haven of salvation not to know or to want anything by oneself but to be guided by God who walks before us.’

...This doctrine is rooted in contempt and hatred for oneself. Calvin makes this point very clear; he speaks of ‘self-love’ as of a ‘pest’ (ibid, 622).” (Fromm 1997:163 f)

In early Buddhism, the “self” (*attā*) that is rejected is the *notion* of some enduring entity that is either identical with our body, or separate from it, or which survives death. This is rejected simply because it does *not* exist. What seems to be persisting, or rather what keeps us “going,” is simply our *consciousness*, which changes every moment, feeding us with vital data of sense-experiences, with which we create our own worlds and realities.<sup>4</sup>

Buddhism teaches self-accountability and self-empowerment, teachings not based on pious faith but through the Buddha’s own awakening, so that we see the true nature of reality. Such positive teachings of self-effort are, for example, famously stated in these verses:

By one alone is evil done, by oneself is evil not done, Purity and impurity are within oneself.	by the self is one defiled; by the self is one purified. No one may purify another. (Dh 165)
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The self is the master of the self; With a self well-tamed, indeed,	for, who else could the master be? one gains a master that is hard to find. (Dh 160; cf 380) <sup>5</sup>
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Self-love makes us human, and keeps us human. It is our self-love that gives us our humanity. It is through self-love that our parents instinctively love us just as they love

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<sup>1</sup> From [Love, SD 38.4 \(3.3.3.4\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> In Fromm, 1997:163-195 (ch 10).

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin (1509-1564), influential French theologian and pastor during the Protestant Reformation (regarded by some as its most prominent figure), well known for his controversial polemics and apologetics, known as Calvinism, one of the darkest forms of religion.

<sup>4</sup> See [Is there a soul? SD 2.16 & Consciousness = SD 17.8a](#).

<sup>5</sup> See [Ādhipateyya Sutta](#) (A 3.40), SD 27.3 (3.1); also [Spiritual friendship, SD 34.1\(5.2\)](#).

themselves, sometimes loving us even more. If not for this special bond, we would not have won our human state.<sup>6</sup>

But this love does not stop here. It is capable of growing beyond itself. It is a reflexive eye, the heart's mirror: we are *aware* that we love ourselves.<sup>7</sup> Yet, we are not alone: as we mature as individuals, we realize that others, too, are like us. They too love themselves. It behooves us then to treat each other with that same human love. This is called the golden rule, the key that opens the door to our humanity as a basis for society.<sup>8</sup>

**HEALTHY SELF-LOVE.** Healthy self-love, then, can be both self-accepting as well as embracing others, and yet being able to be healthily equanimous whenever necessary. This personal dynamic occurs when we see the periodic and constant shifts in our own self-perception. Then, we see ourselves as extensions of others, even of all there is around and beyond us. We realize and accept that we are not alone, that we need to communicate and live with others and with nature herself.

As we progress along such a path, we begin to understand that the "I" that we are is intimately interlinked with "others," and does not exist in itself: *there is really no "I" without others*. The "I" is only a perspective of our momentary and evolving consciousnesses. On an even deeper level, we know that we are much more than merely our names, or titles, or status, or all our wealth—we *are not* the sum of what we have; we *are* or can *be* much more than all that what we have.<sup>9</sup>

Under normal circumstances, without any pathological absence of love, we are likely to enjoy a healthy self-esteem. Such self-esteem or self-love, however, is likely to diminish or even be lacking should our parents, pastors or teachers infect us with self-doubt, narrow views and heartless ambitions. Then, we are, in due course, likely to fall into a cycle of self-rejection or self-hate, which in turn are projected onto those close to us, simply hurting them.<sup>10</sup>

Self-love, as such, can be *learned*, and *needs* to be learned by us. Self-love *can* be taught, *needs* to be taught, to our children, those under our care and guidance, and those who have turned to us for succour. Such a healing process must be tempered with honesty, wisdom and unconditional love. Those close to us are likely to mirror us. We should work to be at least warmly human, so that we do not fall into any subhuman level.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On the "four 7s," see **Love**, [SD 38.4 \(4.4.1\)](#) & **Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** (Khp 9), [SD 38.3 \(7.2.1\)](#). On "feral children," see [SD 38.4 \(4.4.2\)](#).

<sup>7</sup> See **Love**, [SD 38.4 \(3.3.1\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> On the golden rule, see **Veḷu, dvāreyya Sutta** (S 55.7.5/5:353) + [SD 1.5 \(2\)](#). See also **Brahma, vihāra**, [SD 38.5](#).

<sup>9</sup> On *being* and *having*, see **Myth in Buddhism**, [SD 36.1 \(1.3.2\)](#) & **Love**, [SD 38.4 \(2.3 & 8\)](#).

<sup>10</sup> See **Brahma, vihāra**, [SD 38.5 \(3.4\)](#): Overcoming self-hate.

<sup>11</sup> See **Myth in Buddhism**, [SD 36.1 \(4.3\)](#): The myth of other realms; also **Love**, [SD 38.4 \(7.2\)](#).