

Living for love¹

One realistic way of looking at life (our own life, that is), is that it is a quest for love. We live to love. Without love, we do not really live. Let us provisionally define love as accepting ourselves or others unconditionally. This broad definition brings into relief love as a positive emotion in a wide range of living beings, especially intelligent animals.

Most of our pets, we often observe, accept one another unconditionally. We even hear of two different kinds of animals, such as a cat and a dog, being close to one another, or even wolves taking care of human infants as their own. We have also seen at least a few remarkable nature documentaries showing how parent animals care for their offspring, even amongst those we consider less “intelligent” than ourselves, such as sea-horses and spiders. Love is hardwired in us as living beings.

But these are mostly, if not purely, biologically motivated love. It is a mutually natural attraction that ensures the survival of the species. Animals make no fuss of such love, but humans have perhaps the most complicated self-constructed ideas and rituals about love that flow well beyond the womb of life, or even the body itself. Humans, in short, are capable of many levels of love.

Biological love is surely the most primitive of human emotions, looking at life right and raw in the eye, making sure that the species or tribe survives and proliferates. But life also entails the power to do things: to feed, shelter and rest ourselves in some comfort. In a crowd, power also means getting others to do this for us, including controlling and exploiting others. This is the beginning of politics and power-centred bodies (business, religious, etc). Here “the body” represents an almost narcissistic fixation with our own group or tribe.

Such a love is almost only body-centred, one of numbers and increase. As animals, we need to procreate so that there are humans around (a fact we are usually unaware of, or find it simply too uncomfortable to acknowledge).² But this drive is so strong that we are sometimes, in fact, often, unthinkingly pushed into feeding the body's desire. This is called erotic love: love purely on the physical level, the body loving itself, as it were.

Love has its fruits. We often become what we love. The hand takes the shape of what it grasps. This gives us a working idea of what karma really is: we are what we habitually think, do and say. Like it or not, our first love is towards ourselves. If not for this self-love, we would not have survived infancy. But we are able to communicate effectively through loud cries, signals for life-supporting attention.

As our parents and care-giver humanize us during the first seven years of our lives, we master the human language and emotions. Crying becomes ever rarer, mostly as a last resort, reacting to deep pain or great joy or emotional strategy. With language we also learn to twist or hide our thoughts and feelings through words.

One of the vital signs of true love between individuals is that we are able to speak the truth without any fear, and to receive understanding and support. When we truly love someone, we are able to see that person beyond his mistakes or weaknesses. A love-mode relationship is where we are not only compassionate (kind to others even when they do not deserve it, such as to our mischievous or delinquent children), but also to hold them constantly in our lovingkind heart, seeing them capable of becoming better or even the best. Life without such dreams can be only a nightmare.

¹ This reflection is based on Piya Tan's paper on “Love” = SD 38.4: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.4-Love-piya.pdf>

² See “New clothes and nakedness” (R267): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R267-121121-New-clothes-and-nakedness-99.pdf>

A power-mode relationship is where we see others in our own image, a kind of conditional love. This is to see others (including objects, wealth and religion) as “things” to be collected and shown off, rather than as life-changing experiences. If politics and religion are modes of accumulating power, then spirituality is the path of renunciation.

As a working definition, we can see renunciation as a movement toward inner peace and true happiness, when with less we can do more. A proper meditation session is a personal act of true renunciation. Once we find a comfortable posture, like a chicken calmly brooding over her eggs, we have renounced our body (temporarily closing all our five sense-doors).

We now direct all our loving attention to our thoughts, which are often rough, even bizarre, sketches of art trying to imitate life. But life itself is the art, inimitable: it can only be lived and loved. If only lived, it is mere existence (like a plant); with love, we are at least human. Thoughts are like colourful photos of a certain moment in life, frozen still, as if dead, but we are all capable of change, growth and awakening. Love means delighting in joyful surprises from others, no matter how we view them.

Fixated thinking of someone is not love, but probably lust. Feeling for those we love only begins when we suspend thinking for this precious moment of holding that image of love in our hearts. Love is a feeling, a direct taste of the sweetest of human emotions. Our meditation has worked to some healthy level when we are able to see the failures in others as dark shades that light up their true goodness. What is a lotus, if not for the mud and murky water, above which it rises into the sunshine?

Love, therefore, is an art, one that we need to learn through trial and error. It begins with a simple ability to respond to others, to anyone, even a stranger in the street. We start with a wholesome mind of unconditional acceptance of everyone around us wherever we are. Good manners are but a ritual of this, but they work better when spontaneous.

Love gets harder in a crowd. Animals tend to love crowds, but wise elephants are known to love solitude. In a crowded group, we are but bodies, basically measured by our outsides. Yet we are but a human crowd of eyes, ears, noses, tongues and bodies. Hell is viewed in Buddhism as the most crowded of places, and heaven the most spacious of being.

As our world becomes more crowded, we can best find true refuge in a most hospitable space – that of our hearts. If we have never truly explored our inner space, we will see our outer space growing ever more crowded and stifling. Hence, we must see breath meditation as learning to free the breath. We must feel lovingkindness by giving everyone, all beings, the space to grow in joy.

Our imaginings of ghosts, God, gods, angels, jedi knights and ascended ones, are but signs of a deeper desire for self-fulfillment. There are no ghosts, God, gods, angels, jedi knights and ascended ones out there. Monkeys and frogs know nothing of them. They are all our own creations in our shaky image.

They are “all” that our senses project: the phantoms of our own eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind (especially the mind). That’s all we are: our five physical senses and the mind. All that we can know,³ the objects of knowledge, are the sense-objects and how we think and feel. But if we truly love, it makes an amazing difference.

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³ See Sabba Sutta (S 35.23) = SD 7.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/7.1-Sabba-S-s35.23-piya.pdf>