

To love is to learn

To love is to learn – this is the great secret of relationship and happiness, or more exactly, a truly wholesome relationship and meaningful happiness. Most of us have been raised with some kind of parental love, one of unconditional giving. Generally speaking, this essential loving, especially during our first seven years, is vital in making us human. If we were raised by wolves or monkeys during this formative period, we would effectively have a feral or simian mind and conduct.¹

For this gift of nascent humanity we should be grateful to our human parents. In a way, we can say that our having a human body is the fruit of our good past karma. In our previous lives, we had habitually behaved as humans, that is, respecting life, understanding the nature of personal happiness, respecting our body and those of others, valuing truth and good, and, above all, being attentive to learning and personal development – this is the essence of the five precepts.

Yet, having a human body is only a beginning. The kind of values that our parents have incalculated in us, the religious training and schooling we have undergone, and the kind of friends we tend to keep, form our humanity or lack of it. Notice, however, that all these humanizing factors are external, that is, they are likely to be imposed upon us, often unconsciously. We need to understand how they affect us and how we affect others as a result.

The most effective and wholesome of humanizing factors is the realization that we are ourselves capable of good and growth – something beyond these external factors, however good or holy they may be. They are like the giant living trees and fertile human jungle from which we have sprouted forth. However, if we were to fall and remain in the trees' shadows and darkness, then we would be sadly stunted in some significant ways.

It is the nature of plants to seek the light and grow towards it. We must realize that it is in our nature to seek the light, the human spirit, that is, the highest and widest to which our minds and hearts can uplift us. We cannot really understand what this means, much less live it, if we do not have love.

If we are the fruit of our parents' love and raised in love, then we are more likely to go on loving. With such love, all kinds of goodness is possible. Not only is goodness possible and real to us, but we are capable to showing and giving it to others with healing gentleness and great compassion. In other words, the is unconditional love.

The Buddha has compared unconditional love to a mother's love for her only child.² Why the mother rather than the father? It is the mother who bears us for nine months of her life, completely connected to her unlike any other being. At the end of this period, she suffers the pains of freeing us from her womb that we may have a life of our own.

Great are the tearing and shearing pains mothers feel, the kind that a man can only vainly imagine. Ask any mother, and she is most likely to declare that her pains were great but well worth it. It brings forth her masterpiece, one with a life of its own; an unrivalled creation.

Of course, a mother cannot do it alone. A suitable father, too, has a vital part in this love-life process that keeps the world going. Science may be able to clone babies, but the eggs must still come from a woman, and the seeds from a man. In short, we are the fruit of a duality,

¹ Love, SD 38.4 (4.4.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.4-Love-piya.pdf>.

² Karaniya Metta Sutta (Khp 9 = Sn 8.1), SD 38.3: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.3-Karaniya-Metta-S-khp-9-Sn-8.1-piya.pdf>.

unifying fundamentally opposing qualities, perfectly melded in love. For these reasons, the Buddha declares that parents are our true God, our real Creator.³

To love means to suffer. This only sounds bad if we think that a word is limited to only one meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary gives more than 20 meanings and usages of the verb “suffer,” one of which is “to allow or permit a person, animal, or inanimate thing to be or to do so-and-so.” The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary puts it more simply: “undergo, experience.” Hence, to “suffer” someone or something is to invest time in it, to direct our attention to it, to allow it to be a part of our lives, yet to love it and let it be.

If our world is what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think, then what we “suffer” (we cannot really choose otherwise) we simply absorb into our being forever. In this sense, we are nothing but a string of events and experiences, conscious and unconscious. If we suffer consciously, then we learn to take charge of our lives; if we suffer unconsciously, then we lose that charge, someone or something else takes over our lives.

The best way to consciously suffer is to love. Conversely, we can also say that to truly love is to suffer, especially to love heartfully; that is, to experience someone or undergo something attentively and patiently, to happily spend time with another who is also happy as a result.

Such a happiness may or may not be expressed in physical contact. It is common in traditional communities the world over to show this unconditional love by some kind of bodily contact (holding hands, touching the shoulders, hugging, and so on) even with the same sex, without any connotation of sexuality as we often understand it today.

There was a time (and perhaps still true today in some quarters) that we may not touch royalty, or high-caste priests, or even the opposite sex (in public anyway). Hence, such positive bodily touching breaks the taboo of social distance. Interestingly, the more a community (such as the Buddhists of SE Asia) allows such a public display of bodily contact, the more emotionally healthy and unified they are likely to be.

Still, sex and love are worlds apart. Sex is fixed on the body and grieves to grasp what it sees as desirable in another; love, on the other hand, arises in our own hearts, grows, and is given away. Sex may be said to be straight or gay, but never platonic or unconditional. Only love may be platonic or unconditional. Sex is a conditional relationship between opposites (even amongst the same sex); love, on the other hand, is an unconditional acceptance of self and other.

If religion has ritualized and externalized love by making us direct it to some unseen imaginary being or to a defining set of beliefs or to an exclusive tribe, it can never be unconditional. This is a love that is rooted in fear and submission, which is today theologized into a love of power, of triumphalism and evangelism. Spiritual love, on the other hand, is beyond religion; it is universal, and an unconditional acceptance of self and other: this is the power of love.

To truly love, we must begin to accept ourselves, warts and all. We have to begin here, as there is nowhere else that healing and happiness can start. But we must not stop here; then, it is narcissism, a fate worse than lust.

Or we could have been hurt before. So we put up an unfeeling wall around us to keep out pain. But the walls keep out love, too. The truth is that the pain arises from our inability to accept ourselves and others.

To happily accept ourselves, it helps that we also accept others just as they are, that is, as a starting point of our unconditional love (metta). For, what we hate in others are the very

³ A 1:132, 2:70 f; It 110; J 5:330 f: see **Love**, SD 38.4 (4.4.1), <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.4-Love-piya.pdf>.

badness that we ourselves have, consciously or unconsciously; otherwise, we would not have been so reactive to them. When we punish others for their seeming failure, we are merely hating our own failures in not being loved when we needed it most.

For this reason, the Buddha places compassion on par with wisdom. We need wisdom to be able to be compassionate, that is, to be kind to others even when they do not deserve it, especially when they do not deserve it. Compassion is even greater than gratitude, which is kindness that *should* be paid back, a measurable kindness, as it were, repaid for a kindness shown (a sort of politically correct conduct).

No greater love is there than to live our lives for others as we would for ourselves. Love is beyond death. For, if we love, that love lives on in our memories. Love is a living and lively feeling that is more than a person, a body, or even a mind.

True love, as such, knows the beloved as if he were a clear looking-glass: we see the best of others in us, and the best of us in others. It is like two clear mirrors facing each other. It is the fullest learning we can have, a true knowing of self and other, that we are really one.

Love creates and empowers us to be creative. Love is a full celebration of life. Feel our joy as we read this, that we may love as we have never before. Yet love makes all good possible. It breaks down the walls of personal lust, family loyalty and religious piety, into a universal and unconditional acceptance of all beings beyond all limitations. And this love begins in our own hearts here and now.

These joyful words are the fruit of the love that you have shown me, that you may show it to others, too.

R281 130306 Simple Joys 107
Piya Tan ©2013 130302