

I love you

[Previously published as fb181231 piya]

Buddhism teaches *mettā*, universal or unconditional love, but we almost never hear Buddhists actually saying “I love you,” or even “Love you,” the way a westerner, especially a western Buddhist, often does. One reason is probably because traditional Asian Buddhist ethics has to compete with Confucian class ethics of self-effacement and deference to authority (who can say what, how, when, where and to whom).

Asian Buddhists generally see Buddhism as a practical teaching rather than an extension of their intellectual culture and personal evolution. Clearly, however, as they are exposed to the basic and practical teachings of the Buddha by capable teachers, more Buddhists feel empowered to freely express their appreciation of Buddhism.

Asian Buddhists today are more appreciative of the popular Buddhism they are exposed to, which gives them a taste of a more global and liberating Buddhism than the old ethnic traditions. They celebrate their irrepressible joy in feeling the Buddha’s teaching, for example, by forming Fan Clubs for those monks whom they deeply appreciate.

Fan clubs were very popular about a generation ago, in the heyday of “pop” music (like “pop” Buddhism today!). As a teenager, I remember writing to my pop idols, to the Elvis Presley Fan Club, the Cliff Richard Fan Club, the Rock Hudson Fan Club and the Rick Nelson Fan Club, and they all responded by sending me their autographed photos.

A Fan Club, by definition, limits our admiration to a particular person, our idol. It is easy to love our idol, but this is not universal love, even much less than the unconditional love that the Buddha teaches us to cultivate. Simply put, we need to extend such Fan Clubs to, firstly, our parents; then, our family and close friends, then, those who have been kind to us. And so on.

It would be very strange, indeed troubling, if we adore our Buddhist idols but hate our own parent or family, for example. This then is likely to be a symptom of the defence mechanism of compensation. It means that we should direct our mindfulness inwardly to heal ourself.

The reason we don’t think of forming Fan Clubs for parents, family and the kind is surely because such love should go without saying. The problem is that they remain so—without “I love you” being said, and more importantly, being shown. Moreover, one of the most embarrassing questions we would not want to be asked is: “When was the last time you said I love you to your parents? ... to your spouse? ... to your son or daughter?” Hence, we are left loveless, compensating ourselves by making lots of money, turning to glorious food, chasing exotic pleasures, talking bad about politicians, worshipping our teachers as “arhats” and saints, or simply disagreeing with others.

On a light note, Singaporeans who can afford it, seek surrogates to whom they can express their irrepressible love and goodness. We see them dearly and freely, unconditionally, saying, “I love you” to their dogs, cats, rabbits, chinchillas, birds, frogs, fish, and exotic animals,

even plants. Now, when this kind of joyful devotion is directed to humans, even in a rare, small way, the benefits are immeasurable. Hence, it is called unconditional love.

I am fortunate to have an ideal wife, Ratna, who freely and regularly says “I love you” to me. I feel that just saying these words to her is insufficient to reciprocate the kindness she has shown me all these decades we have been together. Her undivided devotion to our family, 2 sons and 2 cats, and me, have created a heaven on earth where I can work whenever I like (which is almost everyday) on the suttas. For that, **we** (you and I) all have to be grateful to this one special woman.

How do I reciprocate her kindness? Physical housework overwhelms her as a woman, wife, mother and housekeeper (cook, cleaner, etc). She covers herself with an array of Tokusen plasters over the back of her hands and shoulders, wears knee-pads in bed, and so on. When asked, she tells me that the daily dishwashing often brings on these pains. I realize that I must free, at least lighten, her of this burden.

Dishwashing is not a chore when it is purposefully and mindfully done (more than merely for the sake of clean crockery, cutlery and cups). As I wash and scrub at the sink, I often contemplate, “Cleaning, cleaning” (*rajôharaṇam*); sometimes, “This frees Ratna from her pains ...” The chore actually becomes blissful. But there was, at first, a cost for me: a stiff lower back, since I was more used to sitting at my desk than standing at the sink.

Thanks to the prodding by our prize-winning pole-dancer nephew who now has his own dance studio, I was convinced to do some 150 minutes of exercise at dawn every week (every other day) at the numerous exercise parks in our neighbourhood. That effectively removed my back-ache. This washing routine also moved our 2 sons to chip in the home chores often without having to be told.

The point of this reflection is this: It is not enough merely to **say**, “May all beings be well and happy!” We should at least **show** love to significant others in real life; otherwise, we are merely ritualizing a beautiful necessary act, which may, perhaps, only bring us a comfortable rebirth as those well loved surrogate pets.

When I was living in Thailand in my 20s, I was amazed at how warmly loving the Thais can be. They are so open and free in their gestures of acceptance and love. Physical contact is their most common language of non-sexual appreciation of others. Such warm friendliness can also be commonly seen amongst the native Filipinos.

Here are some suggestions for the use of physical contact as love language (except for monastics, of course):

- For spouses, partners and close friends: Hugging, cuddling and holding hands regularly.
- Appropriate physical touch even in public places (such as a warm handshake with both hands).
- With family members, children and close friends: Touching elbows, warm pat on the shoulder or back, tousling hair, giving a gentle poke, even kissing (on the forehead or cheek).

- For the aged and infirm: A warm hand touch; gentle massage of arms or legs (if they need or want it).
- Men may even wrestle, jostle, tickle or use other “aggressive” forms of touch.

All this to be done with a gentle warm smile, or an inner smile, always.

For the new year 2019: Surprise ourself and others with **love!** Happy new year!

R592 Revisioning Buddhism 228

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2019 rev