

The HeART of Loving

We must love ourselves before we can love others—so we often hear. This is not true; not always anyway. The reason is simple: we simply do not really know how to love at all. Often, we end up with self-pity on one extreme or with narcissism on the other.

In Buddhist practice, self-love is often used as a rule of thumb for those who hate themselves or who hate others. It is a special healing technique, using lovingkindness (*mettā*), to learn to cultivate and give love where it is needed. Just as love can be directed to ourselves, it can also be directed to others.

Giving love we have it

The first lesson in love—which we often forget or simply do not know—is that we only have love when we give it away. Yet love is not something we can freely throw at others the way we rid of refuse into a dumpster. We have to give it rightly and in a timely way.

One good way of giving love rightly is to begin by **admiring** some good quality in that person. This is a common way we go up to others to befriend them. It is the same as respect, but when we often think of that person with respect, it is love.

Then, we want to emulate that quality we love in others. In doing so we become connected with that beloved. We begin to see more of that person, we accept more of him, eventually the whole person. To accept the whole person means to see his failures as merely passing shadows of the beautiful light that he is, a light in which we see ourselves more clearly, more wholly.

The narcissist

We are able to see what is *good, true and beautiful* in the beloved. When we are used to see what is good, true and beloved, we will also see the good, true and beautiful in ourselves. Then we begin to truly love ourselves. For what is love but to see what is good, true and beautiful that we are.

The opposite of one who is loving, good, true and beautiful is **the narcissist**, self-absorbed, fragile and desperate for recognition. We tend to see a lot of narcissists in a culture where people tend to think of love as the feeling we get when somebody satisfies our craving for praise and attention, not as what we selflessly give to another. In fact, a narcissist only sees himself; a narcissist cannot really see another person. He only perceives the effect that other people are having on him.

Falling in love

One who is in love is often like a narcissist. He tends to only perceive the effect that the beloved (person or object) has on him. However, unlike the narcissist, the one in love seems to only see the beloved, and to see him or her everywhere. Falling in love in this way is not a conscious decision we make for our own benefit. It is submission to the beloved without counting the cost. We simply lose control of ourselves.

Often when we fall in love, we are admiring or desiring only a part of the beloved, not the whole of the person. For that reason, when we have gotten what we love, after marriage, we begin to see more failures in the other person than seeing the whole person. In important ways, courting is the precious time we spend seeing and learning about the whole person. We learn to give love, and see our giving as more pleasurable than receiving. The goal of true love then is to enhance the life of the beloved. In doing so, our own life is enriched.

Unconditional love

When the other person, the beloved, happily reciprocates, there is a blending of one whole person with another whole person. The giving and receiving become more natural and less distinct. This is **loving-kindness**: accepting others wholly and unconditionally with love.

When this love is wisely given and joyfully received, the sense of self in both individuals is likely to dissolve away. One has given oneself away to the other. Free from *self-view* and *self-regard* (unlike the narcissist), one can then fully see the other as a person, as oneself. It is as if both are one. The body may age and decay, but the love remains. Hand in hand, we grow old together, of one heart and mind.

Love is proactive

This selfless love does not end there; it begins there, and easily touches others. Love may be a feeling or even an emotion; but it should not remain so. True love is unconditional and active; true love accepts others as they are—like a parent loving her only child. True love does not merely feel or sing about it. True love acts on it.

True love may evoke positive emotions and beautiful feelings; but true love is more than an emotion or a feeling. People who truly love, *unconditionally and actively*, are moved to give others this *lively* love so that the beloved will *live* better lives. This is the love that sees others beyond their failure, that is kind to others even when they do not deserve it, especially when they do not deserve it. This is **compassion**.

However, it's easier to give to those who deserve it. Hence, the root practice in Buddhism is giving, especially giving what is *life-giving* to renunciants (such as food, clothing, shelter and health), that is to those who have pledged themselves to the good, true and beautiful. When a renunciant accepts our gift, we gratefully rejoice; we thank the renunciant for accepting our gift, for accepting us.

Similarly, when we give to others in need and in pain, we thank them, too, for accepting our giving. When they accept our gift, we are blessed, just as they are blessed in accepting. The giving is twice blest. We may even say it is *thrice blest*. Giving blesses the giver; giving blesses the receiver; the gift, too, is blessed. Of such giving, the highest, the most blessed, is that of **the gift of truth**, the Dharma. It teaches us to give and to receive. To give and to receive means that one is free in true spirit.

Selfless love

By now we should accept that **true love** is neither an emotion nor a feeling, but an art, a skill, that we can and must cultivate—by simply but wisely giving it away. We then begin to see deeper into the very idea of love, that it is the appreciation of the **being** of others. Love makes life precious; life is precious, we must love it. Life is people and beings; we accept them as they are, with love. This is the very **first precept** of life.

When we truly love others, we give selflessly to them what really frees them, that is, the gift of **life**. For, to live is to love; to love is to learn; to learn is to be joyfully free.

We can give without loving, but we cannot love without giving. The greatest love is the gift of wisdom.

R932 Inspirations 573

Piya Tan ©2025

250904