

A Unified Theory of Love

Love is by its very nature unity, and if you have feelings of self-loathing, they inevitably become part of your relationship with the loved one.



EVERY SUNDAY EVENING the Turtle Island Yoga Studio in San Rafael, California, is transformed into a vipassana meditation hall. A large silk painting of the Buddha, which I commissioned from a street artist in New Delhi for just this purpose, hangs on the front wall, and all the yoga mats are laid out around the room. A small statue of Nataraj, the dancing Shiva, sits atop a cabinet containing yoga props, reminding us that we are engaged in a practice from one tradition in the space of another. A set of wooden yoga blocks, covered with a hand-woven cloth made by the now-Christian natives of Machu Picchu, is used as a makeshift table for notes and books; and a singing bowl from Tibet, which serves as a bell, is placed on a cloth one of the regular attendees brought back from Bhutan. A *katha* (silk scarf) blessed by the Dalai Lama is draped over the painting of the Buddha. Most of the other yoga props such as blankets and bolsters are utilized for sitting cushions.

Every Sunday, unless I am out of town teaching a retreat, I lead the *sangha* in guided meditation and gen-

tle movement, and offer a Dharma talk and discussion. The class is free and open to anyone. About 15 minutes before the class begins, while there are few people in the room, I start sitting on my cushion, closing my eyes. Gradually, the space fills with men and women of varying ages and backgrounds. All come for one reason—to seek a deeper understanding of the truth of life and the freedom that comes with this experience.

Forty-five minutes later, I open my eyes and ring the bell, signifying the end of the sitting. Every Sunday evening is an inspiration. Even with my eyes closed I can feel the intent, the sincere work of people coming together, seeking to free themselves from those hindrances of the mind with which we all struggle. Upon opening my eyes, I see for the first time who has come and make a connection with each person in what is now a silence-filled hall of inquiry.

Each time a strong sense of community is formed by the power of the silence, even though many people may not know anyone else in the room or may be there for the first time. The ecumenical quality of this experience is overwhelming; none are excluded, and there is no “ism” required, only a sincere interest in the practice of inquiry and a willingness to develop the capacity of loving-kindness and compassion for all, including oneself.

In the Buddhist tradition, the terms “loving-kindness” and “compassion” refer both to qualities of the mind and heart and to specific meditation practices that help you develop these qualities. Loving-kindness and compassion greatly enhance your ability to stay mindful in both meditation practice and daily life. These qualities can be very difficult to develop in any depth, and for some they can be hard to even understand. Yet, fostering their development is essential for spiritual maturation.

When I was first introduced to loving-kindness and compassion practices during a 10-day silent meditation retreat some 15 years ago, my initial reaction was to walk out of the room each time these practices were

taught. I was interested in deepening my understanding of the mind, and when the teachers started discussing developing emotional qualities, I thought they were being sentimental. I was convinced one could not practice compassion as a discipline, and the idea of fostering loving-kindness through repetition of certain phrases seemed silly. Moreover, since inquiry practice involves not controlling the mind but learning to stay present with it wherever it moves, I thought what the teachers were asking us to do would interrupt the momentum of the vipassana practice. I was really irritated by the whole idea and felt resentment and distrust. I skipped the sittings in which these practices were taught and used the time to run on a nearby track, feeling simultaneously defiant and a bit guilty.

After a few days of rebellion, it occurred to me that maybe I should have some actual experience of the practices if I was going to have such animosity towards them. So I started taking the instruction and, once I stopped feeling self-conscious, discovered that they had real value. The practices involve developing compassion and loving-kindness for yourself, your benefactors, those you are close to, and those for whom you have neutral feelings or even negative feelings. I was amazed that they really worked. Some people have trouble working with individuals for whom they have negative feelings, but for me the most difficult focus of the practices was towards myself.

Love Thy Neighbor & Thyself

THE BUDDHA TAUGHT that the sincere practice of inquiry leads to an inner experience of freedom and that compassion and loving-kindness are states which arise naturally from this freedom. Similarly, Christ taught, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," not as an onerous duty, but as a path of joy connecting us to one another through that which is divine in all. Of course, the problem we all struggle with is how to find that love for another, particularly a difficult other. Even more challenging for many is feeling love and acceptance for oneself. Implicit in Jesus' teaching is the prerequisite of loving

yourself. If you have self-hatred, it will define the quality of your love—or lack of love—and it will ultimately manifest in your love for another.

You may protest upon hearing this teaching that although you struggle with self-hatred, your love for your spouse is mostly pure, and that certainly your love of your children is pure. I do not doubt the truth of your protestations, but experience has shown me that in the end there is only one love. Love is by its very nature unity, and if you have feelings of self-loathing, those feelings inevitably become part of your relationship with the loved one. It limits the fullness of the experience of love, both for you and the other. Also, if there is acute self-dislike, no matter how much you try to hide or ignore these feelings, they are injurious to those you love, particularly children.

It is important to make the distinction between regret for your past actions or distress over present shortcomings and lack of self-love, which you experience as self-loathing or worthlessness. These feelings of regret and distress are a necessary part of maturing behavior. Skillfully worked with, they help foster what Buddhists call the practice of *sila*, or ethical behavior.

Of course it is appropriate to experience your faults for what they are, but it is even more important that you hold those faults in a context of compassionate love for yourself. On the spiritual path, you don't create your identity based on your faults; rather, by acknowledging your shortcomings, you are able to see clearly the harm they cause you and others. This clear-seeing becomes the motivation to develop an inner life so that even the bad moments are not wasted; instead, they are used for spiritual fuel. Moreover, fully opening to the suffering caused by unskillful behavior evokes feelings of compassion, the appropriate response to suffering no matter its origin. Similarly, seeing that unskillful actions are the result of unhealthy mind-states helps you understand the importance of compassion and loving-kindness practice in alleviating those mind-states.

Compassion (*karuna* practice) and lov-

ing-kindness (*metta* practice) are concentration or absorption meditations in which the mind is focused ever more firmly on a single object. As one of my teachers, Sharon Salzberg, says in her book *Loving-Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (Shambhala, 1995), the purpose of these practices is to cultivate the intention to embrace all parts of yourself and to overcome feelings of separation from yourself and from others. Thus, you learn to receive and work with your faults as sources of needless suffering, and spontaneously move towards change in order to relieve that suffering. As these practices mature you feel a sense of warmth, good intention, and deep sympathy towards yourself.

The Way Things Are

ON SUNDAY EVENINGS someone in the sangha usually brings tea and cookies, and afterward we gather socially before returning home. This is a time when people will approach me with a question or to state a feeling that they were not comfortable revealing in front of the group. Oftentimes it is in regard to working with self-rejection, although the expressions used may not be direct. Sometimes it is in reference to a sense of failure or loss. For example, as one woman says, "I was so consumed by my work in my 30s and 40s that I never really had a life. Now I'm 52, and it's too late to bear children, and I'm probably never going to be with anyone." Or, a man in his mid-30s says, "I haven't done well compared to everyone else. I don't have much money, haven't really accomplished anything, and I'm alone."

These utterances come from people whose faces are open and softened by the silence of meditation, and their pain is palpable. My first response is simply to consciously be with their pain, recognizing the realness and dignity of the experience. I do not urge them to simply let go of the feelings. To do so without first being with what is arising in the moment would only add to the sense of deprivation that the person already feels. What is arising in the moment is suffering, and the first response in the face of suffering is compassion. It takes so long to truly

grasp that this is so, and in any given moment it can so easily be forgotten, yet compassion lies at the heart of what it means to be fully human and allows us to be at peace in the midst of pain and turmoil.

Each of us has experienced the feelings that arise from having failed miserably or from being hopelessly inadequate in regards to something or someone you deeply cared for. Maybe you have to live with the devastation that comes with an irredeemable loss caused by a mistake you made or with the consequences of cruelty by another. What you may not have noticed is how you organize inside in reaction to these losses, failures, and mistakes. This inner experience is very subtle, quieter than all the noise of your big emotions in reaction to the external event. If you look closely, you may discover that you reject the experience even as you are feeling it, never fully accepting it to be what it is because you so desperately want something else to be true.

Living with the insistence that the past should be other than what it is is hopeless, yet most people suffer in this way without ever realizing it. It is this separation from your real emotions that compassion and loving-kindness can help you overcome.

The more painful your feelings, the more likely you are to hold the experience at bay, never able to fully let it in so that it can be processed and relinquished. Nor are you able to let it go, since that would first require allowing it to permeate you to whatever degree of impact it has for you. You separate from it by becoming angry or restless, or you start to judge yourself or others and fantasize about how you could have been different or done things differently. You repeat this story to yourself over and over again and harden around the experience. Why? Because the feeling seems so unbearable that to fully let it in seems as though it would be to experience total death. You mistakenly believe separation is safety. Paradoxically, the opposite is true: To allow the experience in is to embrace life.

The End of Suffering

ON THOSE SUNDAY evenings when someone describes a difficult situation in his life and asks how to work with it, he is usually not aware of being in a state of separation from difficulty. The first suggestion I make is that he pay more attention to what is actually going on when this situation arises in his thoughts. I encourage him to see the physical and emotional tensions and recognize the resulting contraction as suffering, then to hold his suffering with compassion and loving-kindness as opposed to analyzing it or berating himself for not getting over it. Compassion is an energetic response, not a mental idea. It arises in the body through the belly and heart. It is what you feel when you see a small child fall and scrape a knee. Your natural response is to pick the child up, not because the holding can make the scrape go away, but because it provides a kind of comfort that is healing to the spirit of the child. It is exactly in this energetic spirit that you hold yourself when you are fully accepting the truth of your own past experiences; the task is to find the humility and the courage to open to yourself in this manner, and it is not easy.

If you work with concentration and intent on the meditation cushion, you can build your capacity for compassion. In Buddhist teachings, a kind of prayer or mantra is often taught—“May I be free of pain and sorrow.” Or you can substitute words you make up yourself. I encourage people to visualize holding themselves as a young child and actively say to themselves, “I can see that you are hurting, and I am very sorry. May your suffering cease.” You will eventually be able to experience your expanding compassion in the body as warmth and well-being.

Loving-kindness is the intention of goodwill towards yourself and others. There are certain classic phrases that are taught for practicing loving-kindness, such as “May you be well. May you be safe. May you be happy. May you have a life of ease.” As with compassion it is not about striving toward some critical amount of loving-kindness; rather it is about building the intention and holding it as a core value. Energetically, loving-

kindness is more proactive than compassion. It is like seeing a child happily playing and spontaneously feeling loving-kindness just for the existence of that life, rather than responding to pain or fear.

Another factor that helps build compassion and loving-kindness is the silence of the meditation hall. Communal silence is like a magical elixir—it not only overcomes feelings of separateness between you and another, it also brings together the separate parts of your own identity.

The analogy of baking is sometimes used to describe this process. First you combine the dry ingredients—flour, sugar, salt, baking soda, etc.—then you stir in the water or milk. The addition of the liquid binds the dry ingredients together. Once they are mixed, the dry and wet ingredients form a dough. Then it is just a matter of baking with the proper amount of heat before you have a loaf of bread.

In meditation the silence slowly mixes your various feelings, moods, and contradictory beliefs into a soft, pliable sense of presence, and the hours on the cushion produce the heat which generates insight. From this combination of conditions, there slowly emerges a person grounded in wholeness and understanding. It takes time for this heating process to work, but it doesn't matter if your mind is restless and constantly wandering, or your body is in pain, or you are filled with doubt; all these reactions are just fuel for your work on the cushion.

As your capacity for compassion and loving-kindness grows, you begin to discover the many nuances of that which we call love. Is love at its heart desire? Is it love you are feeling when you wish good things for your loved ones? Or is love an unmoving energetic state from which all else moves, including your good intentions and good wishes?

If it is the latter, then there is a unity of love, an unchanging state of love which sometimes we are in touch with and other times not. T.S. Elliot put it this way in *Four Quartets* (Harcourt Brace, 1974): “Desire itself is movement / Love is itself unmoving, only the cause and end of movement.”

When you are in touch with this

unchanging state, feelings of compassion and loving intentions spontaneously arise in you. You value these responses so much because they allow you to temporarily become part of this unchanging state of love. From this perspective love is always present, empty of form itself, yet present in all forms. It is we who are separated from this love due to our inability to just be with things as they are. As you do your spiritual work, you begin to stay more present, to fully receive the moment just as it is, and you experience more loving intentions—even towards difficult people—because you feel less separation.

It has often been suggested that the great mystics and teachers are able to directly experience this unmoving state of love and that it is from this grounding that their capacities emerge. Many people believe that the Dalai Lama has such a capacity and is only one of many who has realized this state. Whatever you may come to believe about such heightened capacity for love, the journey of this life will not lead most of us to such a state. For most there are only moments of connecting to this state of love, losing the connection to it, forgetting that it exists as a possibility, and then rediscovering it again and again. ■

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