



Love:

What it is and isn't

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What is love?

Love is mentioned in many contexts. What does it mean in terms of spirituality? What is the purpose of love in our life?

What have we been exposed to about love?

As many of us have grown up in a culture of Christianity, let's begin with love as mentioned in one of the most famous verses in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13 New International Version (NIV):

"13 If I speak in the tongues[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,[b] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

This verse emphasizes that love is pure and as our knowledge matures, we realize that other things we consider important will pass away (impermanent). But what is love?

Is love romantic?

Bhikkhu Nyanasobhano ([Leonard Price](#)) discusses this in an excellent essay, [Nothing Higher to Live For: A Buddhist View of Romantic Love](#)

"If it is possible to live with a purpose, what should that purpose be? A purpose might be a guiding principle, a philosophy, or a value of sovereign importance that informs and directs our activities and

thoughts. To have one is to live seriously — though not necessarily wisely — following some track, believing in a hub to the wheeling universe or a sea toward which we flow or an end before which all the hubbub of civilization subsides. What is your purpose, friend, or what should it be?

Perhaps most of us do not come to a clear conclusion in the matter, but this does not mean we have no purpose, only that we do not recognize it or admit it or even choose it for ourselves. In the unhappiest case nature simply takes its course, which is a turbid meandering through the swamps of desire. If life means nothing, then only pleasure is worthwhile; or if life has meaning and we cannot get at it then still only enjoyment matters — such is the view of brutes and some sophisticated philosophers. It slips into the unconscious by default when we hold no other, but we are reluctant to entertain it and will rather, if we think about it, take as our purpose support of family, search for beauty, improvement of society, fame, self-expression, development of talent, and so on. But it might be fair to say that apart from these or beneath these, the fundamental purpose of many of us is the search for love, particularly romantic love.

The love of a man for a woman and a woman for a man is often the floor to which people fall after the collapse of other dreams. It is held to be solid when nothing else is, and though it frequently gives way and dumps them into a basement of despair, it still enjoys a reputation of dependability. No matter that this reputation is illogical — it still flourishes and will continue to flourish regardless of what is said in any book. Love, or possibly the myth of love, is the first, last, and sometimes the only refuge of uncomprehending humanity. What else makes our hearts beat so fast? What else makes us swoon with feeling? What else renders us so intensely alive and aching? The search for love — the sublime, the nebulous, the consuming — remains sacred in a world that increasingly despises the sacred. When the heroic and the transcendental are but memories, when religious institutions fill up with bureaucrats and social scientists, when nobody believes there is a sky beyond the ceiling, then there seems no other escape from the prison of self than the abandon of love. With a gray age of spiritual deadness upon us, we love, or beg for love, or grieve for love. We have nothing higher to live for.

Indeed, many take it on faith that romantic love is the highest thing to live for. Popular literature, movies, art, and music tirelessly celebrate it as the one truth accessible to all. Such love obliterates reason, as poets have long sweetly lamented, and this is part of its charm and power, because we want to be swept up and spirited out of our calculating selves. "Want" is the key word, for in the spiritual void of modern life the wanting of love becomes increasingly indistinguishable from love itself. So powerful, so insistent is it that we seldom notice that the gratification is rare and the craving relentless. Love is mostly in anticipation; it is an agony of anticipation; it is an ache for a completion not found in the dreary round of mundane routine. That we never seem to possess it in its imagined fullness does not deter us. It hurts so bad that it must be good."

What we can learn from this is that romantic love is attachment, the "want" as he puts it. Romantic love is impermanent and because of our attachment, leads to suffering not to its cessation. It is really that connectedness that we are searching for.

What did the Buddha say about love?

When asked about love by the Brahmins, the Buddha stated:

I. Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with loving-kindness, likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with loving-kindness, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.

II. Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with compassion, likewise the second, the third and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with compassion, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.

III. Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with sympathetic joy, likewise the second, the third and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with sympathetic joy, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.

IV. Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with equanimity, likewise the second, the third and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with equanimity, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.

— Digha Nikaya 13 [The Basic Passage on the Four Sublime States from the Discourses of the Buddha](#)

The Buddha states that love is having one's heart filled with loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. These are known as the four Brahma Viharas (Divine Abodes).

Loving Kindness is wishing you and others well

Compassion is the intention to relieve the suffering of others. It arises with the recognition of the universality of suffering and the realization that all living beings desire happiness.

Sympathetic Joy is finding joy in the happiness and success of others.

Equanimity is a perfect, unshakable balance of mind, rooted in insight.

What do the four brahma viharas have in common?

1. Connectedness – we are all one
2. Selfless nature – it is universal.
3. Not attached to an outcome – no expectations
4. Each builds on the others.
5. All are beneficial

The Qualities of Love

Anthony De Mello in "Love One Another" in *The Way to Love*"

"What is love? Take a look at a rose. Is it possible for the rose to say, "I shall offer my fragrance to good people and withhold it from bad people?" Or can you imagine a lamp that withholds its rays from a wicked person who seeks to walk in its light? It could only do that by ceasing to be a lamp. And observe

how helplessly and indiscriminately a tree gives its shade to everyone, good and bad, young and old, high and low; to animals and humans and every living creature—even to the one who seeks to cut it down. So this is the first quality of love: its indiscriminate character.”

The other qualities are it asks for nothing in return, it is unself-conscious, and it is freedom (“the moment coercion, control, or conflict enters, love dies”).

True universal love is not the emotional romantic attachment. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj defined love as the refusal to separate, to make distinctions. True love can discerns, but does not judge.

What is the difference between discernment and judgement? “Having a discerning opinion is like walking into a room and not liking the décor. Perhaps you point out that it is just not your taste. Walking into the same room with judgement means you ridicule, shame, or put down the owner for not having proficient decorating skills.” [Aleka Thorvalson](#) Judgement closes our mind. Discernment is a self-preference or a self-observation. Judgement is stating that preference or observation as a universal truth and condemning others for not accepting it.

But how do we love our enemies?

“How could you go about creating a happy, loving, peaceful world? By learning a simple, beautiful, but painful art called the art of looking. This is how you do it: Every time you find yourself irritated or angry with someone, the one to look at is not that person but yourself. The question to ask is not, “What’s wrong with this person?” but “What does this irritation tell me about myself?” Do this right now. Think of some irritating person you know and say this painful but liberating sentence to yourself. “The cause of my irritation is not in this person but in me.” Having said that, begin the task of finding out how you are causing the irritation. First look into the very real possibility that the reason why this person’s defects or so-called defects annoy you is that you have them yourself. But you have repressed them and so are projecting them unconsciously into the other. This is almost always true but hardly anyone recognizes it. So search for this person’s defects in your own heart and in your unconscious mind, and your annoyance will turn to gratitude that his or her behavior has led you to self-discovery.” De Mello, Anthony. *The Way to Love: Meditations for Life* (p. 87).

Other reflections on love:

“To be “free” only when things are pleasant is not real liberation. Similarly, to love only in optimal conditions is not real love. Not a few Buddhist meditators have experienced great love while in meditation, only to have it disappear quickly outside of meditation. It can be easy to love all beings in the abstract, but it can be a great challenge to do so when we have to live with them. It is one thing to love and another to express that love in daily life.” [Gil Fronsdal](#)

Interview with Thich Nhat Hanh

Question: I hope you don’t mind my asking this question, and you don’t have to answer. But I have always been very touched by what you’ve written about a love that you had, someone you clearly loved very deeply, whom you left. How do you feel about that now? Is that, at this point in your life, a regret?

“That love has never been lost. It has continued to grow. The object of my love grows every day, every day, every day, until I can embrace everyone. To love someone is a very wonderful opportunity for you to love everyone. If it is true love. In the insight of non-self, you see that the object of your love is always there and the love continues to grow. Nothing is lost and you don’t regret anything, because if you have true love in you, then you and your true love are going in the same direction, and each day you are able to embrace, more and more. So to love one person is a great opportunity for you to love many more.”[Thich Nhat Hanh](#)

Question: We human beings say that above all else we want love. We want to give love; we want to be loved. We know that love is the medicine that cures all ills. But how do we find love in our heart, because often we can’t?

“Love is the capacity to take care, to protect, to nourish. If you are not capable of generating that kind of energy toward yourself—if you are not capable of taking care of yourself, of nourishing yourself, of protecting yourself—it is very difficult to take care of another person. In the Buddhist teaching, it’s clear that to love oneself is the foundation of the love of other people. Love is a practice. Love is truly a practice.” [Thich Nhat Hanh](#)

A Song by Beth Neilson Chapman: How We Love

Life has taught me this
Every day is new
And if anything is true
All that matters
When we're through
Is how we love

Faced with what we lack
Some things fall apart
But from the ashes new dreams start
All that matters to the heart
Is how we love

How we love
How we love
From the smallest act of kindness
In a word, a smile, a touch

In spite of our mistakes
Chances come again

If we lose or if we win
All that matters in the end
Is how we love

How we love
How we love
I will not forget your kindness
When I needed it so much

Sometimes we forget
Trying to be so strong
In this world of right and wrong
All that matters when we're gone

All that mattered all along
All we have that carries on
Is how we love