

The Yoga of Relationship

Bringing mindfulness to your romantic life allows you to work with the inevitable difficulties and disappointments that arise.



really wrong; it's just that I don't have some feeling I thought I would have. The more successful and satisfying the other parts of my life are, the less vibrant the relationship feels. He's a good guy, and we're nice to each other. I'm not interested in some other man; it's just... well, that's why I'm here. I don't know what it is."

The woman frowned and continued, "Then, in my meditation practice, I see my endlessly wanting mind and the pointlessness of chasing after some happiness that he is supposed to provide. I know that my happiness can only be found within, but still there is this... disappointment. Just last night, as we walked down the street after having dinner with friends, it felt like I should be going to my home and he to his. We were just friends—it wasn't romance. It's not that I have to have romance; it is just that I thought... This is all just ridiculous!" She finished in a rush, her face now totally flushed. "What do I do with these feelings?"

I SAT SILENTLY AS the woman self-consciously settled herself onto the couch in my office. She was in her 30s, married, well established in her profession, and a sincere student of the dharma. She looked up after a few moments of reflection, smiled nervously, and said, "I guess you wonder why I'm here. I know you don't normally do these kinds of meetings with students, but I don't need an interview about my practice; I need a perspective on my personal life." I had recently worked intensely with this woman at a retreat, where she had told me she was in therapy and that it had been helpful in her life and practice. She was confident and very self-reliant, so I knew she would not casually ask for an appointment. "So let's hear it," I replied.

"I'm confused and contracted around my marriage," she began to explain. "It's not that there's anything

What does the dharma tell me to do?"

I felt great empathy for her confusion. I've made plenty of mistakes in relationships, including being confused between the idealism of my practice and the realities of my emotional needs. But she was doing something wonderful with her confusion—she was using its energy to broaden her inquiry about herself and love. Supported by all the psychological work she had done, her integrity, and her mindfulness practice, she was opening herself to exploring the greater truth that underlies our craving for a romantic relationship.

Whether you are a man or a woman, you may have a question similar to hers. You may be looking for clarity about making a commitment. You may be wondering if you should leave a marriage, or how to improve the one you have, or you may feel that the time for being

with someone has passed you by. In each of these situations, it is appropriate to ask yourself how your ideas of romance mesh with your spiritual values and aspirations. Unfortunately, it is easy to become confused in thinking about relationships in the context of your dharma practice and, consequently, to undermine both.

So I hesitated as I sat there wondering how to answer the woman's question. Certainly, her dharma practice could help her see her relationship more clearly, and it could help her more skillfully implement whatever she decided to do, but was she sufficiently mature to consider consciously making her relationship part of her dharma practice? It is tempting to hear about a profound way of working with romantic love and think, "This will solve all my problems!" But that's only theoretical. To actually practice mindfulness in a relationship, you have to find the strength of heart and mind to persist through much difficulty and doubt in order to make it real in your life.

I first encountered the possibility of integrating outer love and inner practice in a teaching by Ram Dass. A student had asked him a question about relationship. At first, Ram Dass gave a superficial answer, but when the student persisted, he said, "Well, if you really want to look at love from the spiritual side, you can make your relationship your yoga, but it is the hardest yoga you will ever do."

Even though I was only in my early 20s at the time, I already had a vibrant practice that was filtering into my daily life, so I immediately understood the implication of making relationship my yoga. And I wanted nothing to do with it! It did not fit my idealized notion of romance—unconditional love that involved much drama around truth telling and intense feelings in and out of bed as each of us sorted out our childhood wounds and searched for life's meaning. I could not imagine surrendering passion to the purifying fire of practice. But Ram Dass was speaking of a way of being in a relationship that is more fulfilling than living with intense expectations of each other. How could this be?

Only with repeated experience in long-

term relationships and years of meditation practice did I begin to see the delusion that was inherent in my romantic expectations and the suffering that it involved. Expectations are a form of view, and the Buddha taught that view is a fetter to freedom. The truth of this is clearly visible in relationships.

Culturally Conditioned Love

OUR CURRENT EXPECTATIONS about love are based on our culture's concept of romance, which originated in England and other parts of Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries with the emergence of the courtly love associated with knights and their ladies. It was not that romantic love was suddenly invented or discovered then; rather, it evolved into an idealized form that redefined how we perceive love and how we act it out.

According to Jungian analyst Robert Johnson, author of *We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love* (HarperSan-Francisco, 1985), romantic love humanized the love of the Holy Spirit, which previously had been expressed only with religious symbols, by projecting onto a woman the image of spiritual perfection. Said another way, romantic love became the idealization of the feelings that a man was capable of having about a woman, feelings that were superior to carnal lust or economic practicality. Over time, the belief came into being that these pure feelings of love were transfiguring to both sexes and that love was a means of spiritual growth. This new notion of romance combined selfless, spiritual love (known as *agape* in Greek) with earthly, lustful love (*eros*) and a third kind of love, friendship (*filia*).

The idea that the feelings of caring between two people have spiritual meaning was revolutionary. Originally, there was no sexual acting out. The woman who stood for spiritual perfection was often married to someone else; thus, romantic love was an internalized experience of ecstasy of the spirit, not of sexual pleasure. However, as this idea of romantic love spread, it increasingly became a factor in choosing a mate. Historically, marriages were arranged by parents to serve economic and social ends.

But by the 20th century, most people believed that this feeling of romantic love, not arranged marriage, was the basis for making a lifelong commitment.

As the original ideas of courtly love became widespread, they became more and more diluted with ordinary wants, although traces are still there as we search for a "soul mate," fall in love at first sight, and read through the poems of Pablo Neruda. Love is often regarded as the peak individual experience, but without the sense that it is grounded in Spirit (despite our culture's tradition of church weddings). Absent a strong connection to the idea of love being its own reward, it is hard for a relationship to seem like it's "enough." The expectations are simply too large.

For many people, a relationship is considered successful only if all of their sexual and emotional needs are fulfilled, and their economic and social-status aspirations are met. Obviously, things often don't work out in this manner, and there is a feeling of disappointment in the relationship. Many couples address this problem by having children and connecting through them to selfless love. In fact, parenting is the most idealized spiritual act in our culture. But in many instances, the feeling of spiritual connection through the child does not spread to the relationship or to the inner life. When the children are no longer the primary focus, what remains is an arid distance between two people.

Hollywood Romance

HOLLYWOOD'S happily-ever-after romantic comedies carry the implicit message that if your relationship isn't ideal in all ways, then it is second-rate. Nothing could be more wrong, and many romantic movies make no reference to the connection between human love and spiritual love. *Pretty Woman*, one of the most popular relationship movies of the past 25 years, is both a *Cinderella* story, in that the woman escapes the misery of her external life and is blissfully worshiped, and a *Beauty and the Beast* story, in which the man is redeemed from his frozen feelings by a woman who is without guile though still very sexy.

Pretty Woman was popular with both men and women from all backgrounds; however, neither of the main characters in the film does any of the hard work that would generate the strength or generosity to actually be a liberating partner for the other. In fact, their behavior as prostitute and capitalist predator reinforce just the opposite traits. Unlike the fairy tales they reflect—in which the characters are redeemed partly by their honest suffering and open hearts—everything happens spontaneously to this man and woman merely by “magic.”

Pretty Woman's appeal reflects our culture's great hunger for redeeming love in a relationship, but its superficiality actually reinforces the grasping for an end-all, be-all relationship while ignoring the necessity of taking those tough steps that make it possible. Likewise, *When Harry Met Sally*, which illustrates the addition of best friend to the love equation, and *Sleepless in Seattle*, in which neither the male nor female lead has found a place of center within him- or herself, convey the message that deep connection can be made from the surface of life. I frequently meet men and women who have such unrealistic expectations about relationships that they are made miserable by comparing their situation with how they think love is supposed to be.

Loving Insights

THE WOMAN SITTING in my office embodied this dilemma of expectations. For three years, she had been asking herself if she should stay in her marriage and make it work or go look for love with someone else. She felt that nothing had changed in that time and that she finally needed to do something, because she wanted children and believed that the older she got, the fewer “good men” there would be to partner with. I could not tell her what to do, but I *could* show her how to apply mindfulness to her problems, talk with her about the differences between a healthy and an unhealthy relationship, and share what I had learned about the different options for using relationship as dharma practice.

Even if you do not choose to make re-

lationship your spiritual practice, the insights of mindfulness can help you clarify all the expectations and interpretations that determine how much you suffer with romantic love. As you learn the dharma, it becomes obvious that much of the misery you experience in relationships is not caused by the situation itself, or “what is,” but by your mind's reaction to it. You quickly discover that you are tormented by what the Buddha described as “wanting mind.” Wanting mind leaves you dissatisfied with your relationship and your life because it defines life by what it does not have; therefore, there is never an end to the wanting. Or else you experience aversion to certain characteristics of your significant other, yourself, or your life together. You then compare these irritations or frustrations with an imagined perfect alternative and you suffer. These judgments about your life being insufficient build steadily until they form the reality of your perception. You then become restless and worried, or lifeless and numb, in the relationship.

This is not to say that the problems in your relationship are not real, nor is it to say that they are not sufficient reason for leaving. The point is that your feelings become so distorted that it is difficult to know what you truly feel, let alone make a wise decision.

As you bring mindfulness to your relationship, you begin to see that the mind endlessly grasps after things, clings to expectations, and resents your partner if he or she doesn't share the same values or does not meet your expectations. Love and affection are easily forgotten amidst such hindrances. The mind can so cling to images of how things are supposed to be that “what is” is never explored as a chance for deepening love.

When you are more mindful in a relationship, you become aware of how difficult it is to stay vulnerable when there is so much anxiety. Additionally, you discover that without a conscious commitment to staying emotionally present in the relationship no matter what arises, there's a tendency to abandon love and trust when either of you makes a mistake, diminishing the chance that you will ever

grow closer together.

Relationships inevitably involve feeling vulnerable, fearful, uncertain, and disappointed—how else could it be? Yet the untrained mind is not equipped to maintain equanimity, let alone compassion and loving-kindness, in the face of these difficulties. There is also the tendency to want, even expect, your love relationship to heal your childhood wounds, to be a source of unconditional love and endless praise to help you overcome self-loathing, or to rescue you from your boredom and unhappiness or from your lack of purpose. Being more grounded in your spiritual practice provides the strength and awareness to cope with all of these problems. Worked with mindfully, relationships become a vessel to help you travel deeper into yourself and, in time, to become more self-contained and less fearful or needy.

Unhealthy Relationships

IT IS IMPERATIVE, however, that you be able to make the distinction between a relationship that is healthy and one that is unhealthy at its core. Basically, in an unhealthy relationship, your sense of an open, vulnerable self is ravaged and your connection to Spirit is suppressed, as is your spontaneity. You have no sense of possibility for inner development and feel shut off from the joy of life. These unhealthy conditions may arise because of abusive psychological, emotional, or physical factors or because of strong incompatibility that offers no possibility of negotiation. The relationship deadens Spirit; you feel lifeless inside. Your partner might be the one at fault, or you, or both, either because of personal wounds or because the two of you are simply mismatched. If you repeatedly experience the relationship as having an unhealthy core, ending it may be the wise and compassionate course of action.

However, not getting exactly what you want materially from a relationship and not having your sexual needs met does not automatically make a relationship unhealthy at its core. Likewise, not receiving the praise you desire or the lifestyle you had hoped for, or being disappoint-

ed that your partner does not have the personality traits you would prefer, does not necessarily mean a relationship is unhealthy. Any one or more of these conditions could indicate your relationship is fundamentally unhealthy, or it may simply mean that you have work to do in these areas of your relationship and that you need to examine your expectations. This doesn't mean you can't choose to leave a relationship for these secondary reasons, but there is a big difference between leaving because of difficulty and dissatisfaction and leaving as a matter of urgency due to an unhealthy core.

Option 1: Trust in Each Other

IF YOU WANT TO try making relationship your yoga, there are three models of healthy manifestations of love that you might consider exploring. Mindfulness can help you with each. The first is what I call "two healthy egos at the center," which is based on a balanced, honest exchange between two people.

This is the modern ideal of what relationships and intimacy are supposed to be. It is a union of equals, a partnership. Each partner desires to act in a way that is helpful, empowering, and loving to the other. And likewise, each partner expects to receive an equal amount of attention and help in return. This fair exchange includes mutual decision making, sharing of the work, and equal respect for the values and needs of each other.

In a healthy version of this partnership exchange, each person genuinely wants to be fair in giving to the other. This means that even if one partner has some advantage, such that he does not have to give as much as he receives, there is still no exploitation. Each partner gives a fair exchange, ignoring any power advantage. Why? Because each person believes that giving love to the other is a reward in itself. Therefore, the relationship has warmth and spontaneity at its core.

You can see why this kind of relationship requires two healthy egos. If either one of you always feels needy or inadequate, the capacity for generosity of spirit is lacking. Not that you are always going

to feel and act loving toward each other, or that you are always supposed to be in agreement about what is fair or whether you or your partner is doing his or her share. What matters is your intention to base the relationship on a fair exchange, and you trust each other that this is so.

You can use mindfulness to stay present in a partnership relationship and to acknowledge "what is" rather than what your ego wants to be true. Your practice can help you avoid defensiveness and getting caught in fear, and help you give up being controlled by your needs. When the partnership model fails, it is because one or both partners aren't in touch with their own emotions or because of unrealistic expectations. The relationship deteriorates into dysfunctional cynicism, and bargaining takes over as both partners try to protect themselves.

From the perspective of using romantic love as a path to spiritual development, the partnership relationship model is ultimately limited, because your happiness and sense of well-being are based on having your ego needs met. You are not establishing an independent, inner relationship to the love energy that is associated with Spirit. The dharma teaches that everything changes, including relationships—you get sick, or the other person is injured, or your needs change. Something will happen that will cause your ego to take a loss, and you will not have prepared yourself by establishing a more lasting basis for happiness.

Option 2: Trust in Love

THE SECOND OPTION FOR a healthy relationship includes some or all of the healthy exchange of the partnership, but is based more on the idea of love being connected to Spirit. I call this option "love and ego at the center." In the partnership model, your ego sense of self is at the center of the relationship and the relationship is about having your sense of self become ever more healthy. In this second option, your ego is still at the center, but the center has expanded to include a direct experience of love that is independent of ego needs. Therefore, love shares the center with you, and both you and

your partner can become the beneficiaries of that love.

Can you see how radically different this type of relationship is? How many more possibilities of a meaningful life it offers to those who are ready for it? You are no longer keeping score, because you are not thinking in terms of an exchange, but rather your primary relationship is with love itself. Your partner represents your commitment to connection and non-separation, just as was true with courtly love. He or she is the recipient and the inspiration for your deeper relationship to love, but you are not requiring him or her to buy, barter, or otherwise earn your love in any way.

This model will not work in an unhealthy relationship; it has to be enacted with someone who can at least meet the partnership model of love. When love and ego are at the center, you are not abandoning or martyring yourself. Instead, you are giving up certain expectations, which means that your relationship to the energy of love is not dependent on your partner. Your capacity to love grows based on your ever-deepening maturity. The delight in giving happiness to another is at the core. You see your partner through the lens of love, not because he or she is perfect, but because love is not about judging, keeping score, or seeking advantage. It is simply expressing itself.

In this type of relationship, your partner might be less than you desire and there may be many challenges, but these disappointments are not devastating to you, because your happiness is based on the experience of nonselfish love. It is similar to a parent's love for a child. If that love is healthy, the parent does not measure love with the child nor expect an equal exchange; it is the feeling of pleasure in giving that is important. This expanded notion of love is possible only if you believe there is an energetic space in the psyche that is love, with which you can enter into a relationship.

You can see why this option of loving invigorates your dharma practice. Your ego, although still at the center, is slowly transformed by this love that is not based on ego needs. It is this kind of love ener-

gy that leads to the Buddhist *bodhicitta* vow of dedication to the liberation of all beings. You are moving from a personal, self-interested love to an impersonal love that can spread from your partner to other people, and finally to all beings.

In this relationship model, all three aspects of love—agape, eros, and filia—are present and engaging you; however, it is the emphasis on selfless love that makes it such a rich option. You can also be the one who loves love in other aspects of your life. For instance, if you have others reporting to you at work, you can extend your relationship from simply being the one in charge, expecting others to perform, to one who mentors and helps them succeed. In a true mentoring role, you go beyond mere exchange. You may well help others grow to the point that they leave you for a better job. What you receive is the satisfaction of watching them grow and the pleasure of knowing that you are supporting transformation in another person. You can do the same in friendships and in your extended family.

The shadow side of this option is that it can deteriorate into a codependent relationship or martyrdom, neither of which is love—neither is compassionate or skillful. This option can also be misused to rationalize or avoid something that needs to be negotiated, or to manipulate the other person, or to deny your own feelings. Mindfulness helps prevent these shadow sides from occurring.

Option 3: Trust in the Dharma

THE THIRD OPTION for making relationship your yoga I call “love alone at the center.” This represents the practice of fully surrendering all or part of your ego wants in your relationship. You give up any expectation that your needs will be met. If they’re met, that’s great; if they’re not, your practice is to pay no mind and not allow your giving of love to be affected. This is the ultimate practice in nonattachment and in making your relationship your dharma. Not that you submit to abusive or destructive behavior, but rather you forsake normal expectations. Sounds daunting, doesn’t it? It shows how dominant the partnership model is.

The very idea of approaching a relationship in this manner seems strange or even dysfunctional. So why would you consider such an option? The people that I know who have chosen this path have done so for one of two reasons: Either their relationship was bad but they didn’t think leaving was the right thing to do (and they had a spiritual practice as well as a network of support that could sustain them in such an undertaking), or they were in a healthy relationship but were so far along in their practice that it seemed like the natural next step toward their liberation. A “love alone at the center” relationship in which both people have the healthy ability to love is inspiring to witness. And in the few instances I have known in which someone was practicing this option in a difficult situation, it was quite beautiful and even more inspiring. It was as if the human spirit was conquering *dukkha* (the unsatisfactory aspects of life) with love. I want to stress that this option is not about sacrificing yourself or allowing wrong action. It simply means responding to daily frustrations and disappointments with love, over and over again. This is hard work, and to do it you have to genuinely let go of attachment. No wonder Ram Dass called it the hardest yoga!

A less challenging practice is to let go of your expectations in a single area of the relationship. I know many people who have encountered one area of continual dissatisfaction in a relationship, vowed to love their way through it, and succeeded in doing so. In those situations, the other parts of the relationship were sufficiently strong to justify such a choice. By letting go in just one aspect of need in their relationship, those people experienced genuine growth that empowered the rest of their lives.

If you are considering this third option, you would never announce it to your partner. It is something you do internally. Your relationship to this kind of love is fragile and needs to be guarded from either of you using it in a manipulative manner in your moments of tension. Obviously, you do need to talk with someone you trust and respect to do a reality check

with yourself. It is also OK to try this option and not be able to do it. It does not mean that you are a failure; it simply means that it was not an appropriate expression for you at that time.

Love vs. Desire

WHEN I DISCUSSED these three options with the woman seeking my advice, she questioned each in a reflective manner. Finally, she said, “The first one just isn’t going to work right now. The relationship does not feel like a partnership, so if that’s what I want, I should just leave. I have no interest in the third option, but the second one is something I want to explore. It sort of matches how I’ve been feeling, so maybe I have been doing it a little bit already.” I told her that most of us tend to find ourselves in a combination of the three options with another person, a combination that is always changing.

By bringing mindfulness into relationship, you gain the power to consciously participate in both how your relationship develops and how you develop as a loving person. Relationship will not lose its messiness or its disappointments, but by making it a practice, even the difficulties become meaningful. Your commitment to love becomes the ground from which you meet whatever life brings. I did not know what would happen with this woman in her own relationship, but I was confident that if she opened herself to it in this manner, there was the possibility of inner transformation. She would be making relationship her yoga.

Yogis who have lived for years without a relationship often ask me what any of this has to do with them. If you are filled with loneliness, wanting, or resentment toward your situation, you can bring your attention to these understandable feelings, which are hindrances to your own happiness. By sitting with them and applying compassion and loving-kindness, they will burn even brighter for a while, and this heat will help purify the torment they cause in your mind. You may see that your life is the way it is, not as you would have it be, and that if you are ever to have love, it has to arise from the place where you are.

If you are no longer interested in intimate relationships, then your practice can be to start manifesting love in all of its forms, whenever the opportunity arises. It may be at work, with family, in serving others, or with nature. I don't mean anything sappy by this, but rather that you begin to cultivate a quiet sense of good intention and openness to meeting and appreciating life however it appears in front of you.

The spiritual aspect of love is at its heart a paradox. We know that it is sacred and timeless, yet for us it is able to manifest only in time; therefore, it so easily becomes mixed up with our wants. T.S. Eliot wrote in *Four Quartets*: "Desire itself is movement, not in itself desirable; / Love is itself unmoving, / Only the cause and end of movement, / Timeless, and undesiring / Except in the aspect of time..."

Opening to the possibility of making love your dharma practice means exploring the difference Eliot points to between love and desire. Bringing mindfulness to your relationship to love allows you to more fully participate in its power. Life becomes multidimensional, and you start to discover new capacities within yourself. You learn to work with the inevitable difficulties and disappointments that arise in all types of relationships. Slowly those emotions, which you previously knew only as reasons to suffer, also become opportunities for exploring the mystery of being a flawed human being loving other flawed human beings. ■

Phillip Moffitt is a member of the Spirit Rock Teachers' Council in Woodacre, California, and teaches vipassana meditation at Turtle Island Yoga center in San Rafael, California.