

Caring and Showing Love for Others

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Recently at a meditation group meeting we had a discussion on the difficulties of caring for others. Several people in the group had been looking after elderly relatives, or were still doing so, and we looked at why this was so challenging. Many interwoven issues were there, but a thread running through them all was ‘love.’ We could all come up with examples when there seemed to be a conflict between our own needs and caring for others and the sense of guilt, frustration and confusion that arose around this. How could we know if we were doing enough? What was enough? Someone pointed out that often we cannot provide an immediate solution to the difficulties our loved ones and friends may be going through, and asked: “How can we show love at these times?”

Behind this question was perhaps a deeper one: we naturally want to ‘make things better’ for those we love when they are in difficulties; this is part of what we commonly think of as ‘love.’ But if we act on the basis that the situation is fundamentally lacking, and that we have to ‘do something’ to make it ‘right’, we seem to fall over ourselves, and approach the situation from the wrong angle. If the situation is already ‘wrong’, the pressure to put it ‘right’ is there, and given that in many situations, there is very little we can do, the pressure can become

intolerable. If we sit within this sense of pressure we can start to see how much of it is just a creation of our thoughts and feelings. If we can see past the seeming reality of the whirl of thoughts and feelings it is possible to see that the situation is not fundamentally ‘wrong’, *and* that it may be still good to act to improve things.

It’s hard to explain what I mean when I say that the situation is not fundamentally wrong. I have been in situations where seeing this just happened and then the words to describe it had to come later. One turning point for me was during the time I ended up regularly visiting a relative who had been so badly beaten up he was in a coma for six months before he died. This involved the seemingly bizarre (‘visiting’ someone who almost certainly wasn’t aware that he was being visited), as well as the complex (legal and administrative stuff with social services, and even liaising with the police). Everything about the situation was ‘wrong’, in the sense that I would have done anything I could to avoid my relative being in this situation. But the last weekend he was alive, whilst sitting in his hospital room, there seemed to be a coming together of the awful and the perfect. It was awful (i.e. wrong) and perfect (nothing was lacking whatsoever).

It really was awful in the common sense of the word. Friends and relatives were distraught as they had no chance to say goodbye. Someone went to prison for at least five years. I can’t get over the sense I had though, that the perfect and the awful came together and were contained within each other—somehow. I guess we should not be afraid to stand by experiences like this, whilst not claiming that they are somehow ultimate and prove we are special.

People have used different words to try and capture this seemingly impossible ‘meeting.’ The one that works for me is ‘sufficiency’¹: there is nothing missing, nothing needed in the situation to make it right and somehow our doing our best is part of this. Our activity can be part of what I am calling the sufficiency of the situation, which includes the totality of what is going on. Sufficiency is not an end state though, so the word is not quite right. You could say there is a movement which is sufficient and also unfinished in the sense that it is becoming. Nor should sufficiency be made into an object (“I have found sufficiency” etc.); this sounds arrogant and probably is.

What I would like to do here is to try and unpack what I mean when I say we can “see that the situation is not fundamentally wrong” or that it is “sufficient.” I have come to this view through a process that has been convoluted and not easy at times: a process that involved confronting some of my assumptions about what love is, and how we express it. This is an attempt to share the unfolding of this process (one that is far from over) and in trying to convey it, it seems best to reproduce some of the twists and turns of my ongoing attempts to understand what was happening.

So it seems right to start with a look at some of the difficulties we make for ourselves if we hold onto a view of what love is. I don’t want to deny that love exists, so although I may start by undermining some assumptions about it, I also want to acknowledge that such terms as love are important to us, and for good reasons. Buddhism can be portrayed as a cold religion that denies the value of relationships. I think this is a misunderstanding, so in looking at the value of love, I also want to

explore the relations between non-attachment and love; between an ideal of spiritual freedom and the reality of our connections with others.

Being in any kind of caring role is never going to be easy. By the time someone needs help in this way over an extended time, it usually means there may not be a ‘positive’ outcome, if this is defined as recovery or improvement. So we are already in a ‘no win’ situation: we want to help, but beyond a certain point we can’t. So there are some innate difficulties that cannot be brushed away, and yet we can make it worse for ourselves by the way we think and talk about such things as love. It seems that we carry around some common preconceptions about love and how it should manifest, and maybe don’t even realise this until they are challenged.

To give some examples: love can seem like a feeling we ought to have in certain situations. There are nice sensations that we think maybe should be associated with being with ‘those we love.’ Sometimes in using the term we give the impression that ‘love’ is something unchanging. If I love someone the feeling will remain the same whenever I am with them. But does it?

These are the areas in which language can trap us. We feel the need to ask “Do I love this person?”; “Am I showing enough love?” as if the word ‘love’ stood for an actual thing, rather than a process or an activity. I hope this doesn’t sound like a cold analytical exercise. I don’t want to deny that love exists; but the way it ‘exists’ is important. Our language—and grammar even—tends to encourage us to invest in something solid that ‘exists’: as a benchmark that we can measure ourselves against,

as a seemingly firm foundation on which our sense of worth can rest.

What are the problems that arise if we try and define ourselves in relation to feelings and concepts, if we make love (or any other term like ‘compassion’) into a thing? These are some that I have come across whilst talking to other carers:

* It’s easy to feel guilty if feelings of love don’t meet our expectations, we feel we are undutiful, or unfeeling, or uncaring. Then we may try and make up for this by getting over-tired: feeling we must sacrifice ourselves as an ‘act of love’ for the other person.

* Our sense of love may revolve around holding an image of the other in our minds. As the other person’s personality may change through their illness (especially if it involves some sort of mental degeneration), we can wonder “exactly who is it I feel love for?”²

* People I know have talked about situations where elderly parents refuse help, yet they can see they are not coping: to what extent can they overrule them? How is this expressing love? Is it an expression of love to remind people that it would help to prepare for their death (e.g. even most practical things like funeral arrangements can be extremely difficult to talk about)?

There are times when love is the last thing we *feel* in a situation, where we perhaps think we really ought to feel it. This sort of extra suffering seems to point me back to the problem of investing in any ‘thing’ that could define my worth. The fundamental teachings of Buddhism end up staring me in the face.

Everything is impermanent (anicca) and there is no permanent substantial self (anatta).

I can't possess anything. As a changeable entity I am not the sort of being that could possess anything, and furthermore there are no substantial 'things' to possess. If I'm honest with myself there is nothing fixed. Sometimes I feel good about helping someone else. Sometimes I am tired and irritable and on a bad day I want to run away from the whole situation.

Clearly I cause myself more suffering if I create an image of self-worth based on my relations to feelings. But if I am not my thoughts and feelings, I have to be willing to ask the question, "What am I?" This takes it a stage deeper. As Great Master Dōgen said, we study Buddhism in order to study the self. We study the self in order to forget the self.³ The self of the ups and downs, of feeling joyful sometimes and irritable at others, exists in a certain kind of way, just as other changeable things 'exist' like a river etc. Yet the edges of my self are obviously permeable: I am affected by things and have an effect on others. The tiredness that can come from overdoing the 'helping' itself shows that there is a mutual interaction between self and other. I am already part of a larger situation. So in sitting with the problems of the self we let go of self and allow the situation to teach us: we are open to it more.

Am I helping others or are they helping me? Maybe this points us in the direction of one aspect of love: the recognition of the connection with others, and maybe this isn't so dependent on passing feelings. The sufficiency of the situation I talked about at the start can be revealed if we turn our awareness around and look at the cause of our suffering. The suffering points to the nature of self and encourages us to see that the

‘barriers’ between self and other are more like doors or ‘openings’. The situation can teach if we are willing to be in it.

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We can be trapped by the word love, but that isn’t a reason to reject it. We value love for good reasons. There is something that arises spontaneously in many situations, that is just there; that we feel is greater than ourselves and yet expressed through ourselves, and only a word like love is strong enough to convey how that feels. It does mean something to say we love someone, and we tend not to say that lightly. I believe we have to take this on board and not try to just redefine the word love using Buddhist concepts, or be even more extreme and deny the value of the term to the extent that we avoid using it. This is a bit like avoiding using the word ‘I’ or ‘me’ because there is ultimately no self. There is a reason why any attempt to move in that direction makes you impossible to be with.

Sometimes Buddhism is presented as a cold religion. Phrases like detachment from the world, and even ‘revulsion’ from the world have been used to translate some parts of Buddhist texts, so it can seem as if the ideal trainee would be one who barely had any relationships with others, never mind feelings of love or grief.⁴ This is partly the result of poor translations. The technical term *samsara* has been translated so it seems to apply to any involvement with others. *Samsara* is a Buddhist term that literally means “circle” or “wheel” and means the cycle of suffering.⁵ Yes, there does need to be a turning away from the endless suffering we can create for ourselves. Otherwise we can end up trying to end suffering through more suffering. (We suffer because we don’t have enough of something, so try to end suffering by getting more of that something — whether it

be love, appreciation, wealth etc.) But this sort of renunciation is not the same as a rejection of the world.

We also can't blame anyone else. In *samsara* it is our own grasping that turns the wheel, not other people. For this reason I find it understandable, that some are suspicious of a spirituality that seems to avoid awkward emotions by maintaining others at a distance. George Orwell in his *Reflections on Gandhi* gave a good definition of what many would say it means to be human: "The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection,... that one does not push asceticism to the point where it makes friendly intercourse impossible, and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals." ⁶ Perhaps I am not an ideal Buddhist, for I have a lot of sympathy for Orwell's view. It is a bit too easy to imagine that I am demonstrating some kind of universal love by avoiding having any feelings about others, when I may just be afraid to get involved. Relationships are the most complicated, awkward things that never work out as we imagine, and isn't that a good thing?

There is a bit in the film 'Shadowlands', based on the life of C S Lewis, in which the shy Oxford professor falls in love with Joy Gresham and marries her, only to find quite soon that she has terminal cancer. At one point Lewis says, "Why love, if losing hurts so much? I have no answers anymore: only the life I have lived. Twice in that life I've been given the choice: as a boy and as a man. The boy chose safety, the man chooses suffering. The pain now is part of the happiness then. That's the deal." ⁷ Some simplistic versions of Buddhism imply that the best way to avoid the grief is to avoid the joy as well. But those

who I admire in training are not afraid of experiencing the joy and the grief. They arise but they are *not* what defines them. So I am not sure if they are “broken up by life” as Orwell puts it, even though they are willing to risk that happening.

The misunderstanding around love and non-attachment is also connected to the idea of freedom. It can seem that freedom is only ensured through detachment—by avoiding connections with others, or in a more subtle way, by not engaging completely with the people we are in relationship with. So it can seem that we are free *from* things by being distant from them, but this is not what the bodhisattva path is pointing to. As Great Master Dōgen put it: “The venerable demeanor of the active Buddha now is perfectly free, and is nothing but being Buddha through and through. Because it has passed through the path of freedom that is covered with mud and submerged in water, it is unobstructed.”⁸

The bodhisattva way, in which we train ‘for self and other’ is the path of freedom that is covered with mud and submerged in water. In the way Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett described it, through her analogy of the lotus blossom, the lotus grows in the mud, sends a stalk through the darkness, until it blossoms above the water.⁹ The mud is the complexity and difficulties we face, but also the food for the root of faith: it is what we are rooted in. Without this there can be no blossom. So there is freedom *within* conditions. The bodhisattvas are not concerned about gaining freedom for themselves alone; they are just doing what it is good to do.

The term ‘active Buddha’ refers to the point that action *is* Buddha. It is not that we become a Buddha and then decide to

help others. The helping is the Buddha. This works in the same way that we talk about ‘sitting Buddha’ (Rev. Master Daishin’s title for his book on zazen).¹⁰ We are not sitting in zazen to become Buddha, but the action of sitting is Buddha.

Maybe the question we can end up asking ourselves, “How do I show love in this situation?” is the wrong one: It makes it seem as if there is the wish (love) which is separate from the action or activity of love. We wish to love but wonder if we can ‘do’ it. In the same way as there is no Buddha apart from what Dōgen calls ‘active Buddha’, maybe there is no love apart from acts of love and no need to ask if we have ‘it’?

Having said all this, the phrase: “that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life” remains a disturbing one, perhaps because I also fear I may be “broken up by life”; that I could ‘burn out’ as the needs of others are seemingly greater than my capacity to give. I don’t know if any abstract understanding of Buddhist teaching can help me here. When it seems that I am being asked to do the impossible, I have to ‘turn around’ and look at the mind that is ‘wriggling on the hook’ of the problem. In some situations I have found that the problem is bound up with a judgement. I find I can have too fixed a sense of what is good and right and how I can help to make it so. For example, even if I want to help someone stay alive, is life always right and death a wrong? That is a judgement. Something gets freed up when we can see that we are grasping a view of what is right, so at least part of the problem is holding on to concepts.

Another area where subtle judgements can get in the way, is that around worrying whether the ill person will be all right: whether they have the resources to cope, and face their own

fears. It seems a natural enough concern, but if I can turn within at the time of feeling this doubt, I can see it is a fundamental questioning of the sufficiency of the situation itself. This can call me to focus within—to really sit still—which in turn reminds me of the true sufficiency. Then I cannot doubt that it is there for others, and a lot of the worry about whether “they will be okay” can be released. It is a form of judgement if we believe the situation or the person is not sufficient. Who can say?

Although things can seem impossibly difficult at times, never underestimate the effect of just a few minutes zazen. I have known it to transform my view of a situation. Once on a particularly frustrating day visiting someone in hospital, I ended up feeling that the whole complex bureaucracy was ‘out to get me’—everyone was just too busy and didn’t really care. Some ‘time out’ sitting on a bench in the hospital garden worked wonders. Yes, it was complex, and staff were stretched but I could see more clearly the good intention of the nurses and consultants. A place can be a kind of hell realm one moment and the pure land the next.

One of the best pieces of advice I was offered when I was faced with the prospect of visiting a relative in hospital who was in a coma, was “to just turn up and be there.” It cut through a lot of worries, and also all the speculation about whether people can recover from comas, and how you can ‘communicate’ with someone in a coma. I didn’t know what to do, but I could work on dropping any preconceptions, especially of whether I could ‘do’ anything to help. There was never any obvious response from the person, so what could be ‘helping’ in that situation?

So what kind of ‘love’ is shown through the bodhisattva way? It is clearly not just sentimental; it is not just to do with passing feelings, and it is not a way of justifying or measuring our value. Maybe it is expressed in those many small acts of kindness we do almost without thinking: doing someone’s laundry for them if they can’t do it themselves; being willing to listen? Maybe it is shown when we are willing to ‘immerse ourselves in the mud’ without knowing if there is any reward? Maybe we can’t say what it is—we are willing not to know? I sense though that we can recognise it when we see it, sometimes in others, and sometimes we see—almost out of the corner of our eyes—that we are showing it as well.

My thanks to all those who offered comments on this in various ways, including: Mia Hansson, Alex Reed, Jan Reed, and members of the Huddersfield Meditation group.

Notes

1. I am borrowing this term from Rev. Master Daishin Morgan.
2. One carer who reviewed this article commented: I have found the writing of an American psychologist called Pauline Boss helpful in understanding this—she writes about ‘ambiguous loss’—when it feels like someone you love is somehow lost to you but still present (for instance, with Alzheimers or very severe psychiatric disorders). See: Pauline Boss’s most recent book *Loving Someone Who Has Dementia: How to Find Hope While Coping With Stress and Grief* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).
3. Great Master Dōgen, *Genjokōan*, paraphrased from translation by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, in *Zen is Eternal Life* (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1999) available from <http://www.shastaabbey.org/teachings-publications.html>.
4. Examples where rejection of the world is implied include Suzuki’s translation of the *Lankavatara Sutra* in which he translates “Paravritti” which literally means “turning back” or “change” as “revulsion”, (Motilal Barnarsidass, 1999) p. xix.
5. See Wikipedia [entry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samsara_(Buddhism))[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samsara_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samsara_(Buddhism)).
6. *Essays*: Penguin Modern Classics, (Penguin, 2000), p. 463.
7. See quotes from the script at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108101/quotes>.
8. Kim, Hee Jin, *Eihei Dogen: Mystical Realist*, (Wisdom Publications, U.S.; 3 Revised edition, 2004), p.117.
9. See Jiyu-Kennett, Rev. Master, *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom* (Shasta Abbey Press, originally published in 1977, revised edition 1993, now out of print.).
10. Daishin Morgan, *Sitting Buddha: Zen Meditation for Everyone*, (Throssel Hole Press, 2005).