

Love When It Is Hard (4 of 5) Love as Non-Harming

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Hello. Welcome to the fourth talk on love when it is hard. In this talk, we reflect on love when it is hard in times of challenges.

Today I will introduce the topic of non-harming. This is one of the most marvelous and inspiring qualities a human being can have. It is central to the whole Buddhist enterprise. To appreciate that non-harming is a unifying or core principle of the Dharma puts everything else into a very important context. It fits everything else together.

A religion provides values, principles, and orientations for how to live one's whole life. Religion provides the ultimate teachings, purposes, or understandings that

apply to every aspect of one's life. This teaching of non-harming is one of those principles that make Buddhism a religion. It is a religion of non-harming, to not harm. One of the core teachings of the Four Noble Truths is an expression of that. It is a formulation of that teaching. The word for harm is represented by the word *dukkha* or suffering.

I have met people whose very being, disposition, and personality – their way of being in the world – was to be a person who does not harm. They were dedicated to not harming. Sometimes such people are dedicated to being honest. I have met people who seemed incapable of lying or harming others. This was a dedication to not harm.

When I was about 20 or 21, I made a mistake, and someone challenged me to a fistfight. It all happened very suddenly. There was no premeditated thought on my part. Rather than fight, I immediately dropped to one knee and spread my hands out wide. This was to show that now I was vulnerable. I was not going to defend myself. I said, "I can't fight." Rather than beating me up, the person spun around and marched off in disgust.

Whether this idea of not fighting or harming anyone should be practiced all the time in the way that I just described is a personal decision. It is not for me to say what one should do in all the circumstances of life. It is,

however, so important to hold the desire to not harm in the forefront of our hearts and minds. Really make that the first consideration, the first way of thinking about a situation – let us not harm here.

This week I am teaching about love. To not harm is a form of love. We often set a very high bar for our expectations of love. We think that love means being filled with warmth, appreciation, and joy. We expect to feel a radiance of positive regard for everyone, everywhere. Love doesn't have to be so dramatic. Love doesn't always have to be a warm, open, generous heart, gushing joy, appreciation, and compassion for others.

Sometimes love is quieter. It is more basic. One of the forms of love is not harming. We love others by not harming them. We love others by not setting up obstacles to their growth and their evolution in the development of their life. We love others by giving them room to be who they are. We give love to others by giving them safety. So many people in this world are not safe. They don't feel safe and have not grown up feeling safe. When they encounter other people, they don't automatically feel that the other people are safe for them.

To get a sense that you are harmless, dedicated to being harmless, and are not going to harm is a gift that

you give to other people. It is a gift of love and care. Respect for others is a form of love. You may not have gushing warmth for someone, but you can appreciate their autonomy and the possibilities of their humanity. You don't want to mess with it.

A dedication to non-harming can also be directed towards oneself. One doesn't want to harm oneself in any way. This is also a form of love. As I said before, we often measure the idea of love, *mettā*, or compassion towards oneself as more than it has to be. We have this idea that it is supposed to be this warmth, gushing with delight and lots of smiles. Sometimes even towards ourselves, there is a profound form of love that is quieter. It is not a big, gushing feeling of warmth, but rather the simplicity of caring enough to not want to harm oneself.

As we practice mindfulness, a very important thing begins to happen. Mindfulness brings a heightened sensitivity to the impact our behavior, thoughts, attitudes, or impulses might have. We start discovering that when we intentionally want to harm someone else, get revenge, or cynically poke them in some way, we are simultaneously harming ourselves. The Buddha teaches that when we intentionally harm another, we actually harm ourselves much, much more than we harm the other.

The mythic idea of rebirth emphasizes this idea. If we do something like kill another person, that is pretty bad for the person who died. I don't want to diminish the horror of that. However, the person who kills will be re-born endless times and will be violently killed and tortured many, many times in this kind of burning hell. These are the mythic teachings of Buddhism. They emphasize that if we intentionally harm another, we will suffer much more than the person we harmed.

When we have this heightened, deepened sensitivity of mindfulness, we can feel the truth of this. It is a game-changer to feel that and see how much we harm ourselves.

Even when we don't want to harm ourselves, we can see how our negative attitudes toward ourselves continue to cause us harm. Even if the negative attitudes have some truth to them, they are just not needed. We don't need to send arrows into our own hearts. We don't need to set up obstacles that interfere with the natural growth toward goodness, honesty, and non-harming that exists in every heart – in your heart and our hearts. We do not need to add restrictions on ourselves or add things that undermine, discourage, or depress us.

Negative self-talk is one of the leading causes of depression. Negative self-talk can come with such

authority. It can seem like it is true and it has to happen. It repeats itself over and over again. It is not useful. Recognizing it as a type of self-harm might begin to put a crack into this strong impulse we have toward negative self-talk. We begin to realize it is not necessary, and there is another way – a way of non-harming.

It is not easy to make a shift. It isn't so much that we have to actively do something else like love other people. It is primarily learning to avoid. It might just take biting your tongue to avoid saying the harmful thing – that is beneficial. Sometimes we have to restrain ourselves physically so that we don't punch someone out.

Once when I was in Asia, I had the occasion to avoid punching someone in the meditation hall of a Buddhist monastery. We were all monks practicing together. It felt like this monk who was sitting next to me must have hated me, and held a kind of prejudice. During meditation, he was constantly poking me, and saying unkind things. I would just sit there. I never replied. I remember there was one day I felt I wanted to turn around and punch the guy in the face. I didn't do it. I kept my hands to myself. That took a fair amount of restraint. Sometimes it works that way. We just have to have restraint. That is the beginning of an alternative to harming.

Without adding a lot of work, we want to learn to not participate with our thoughts and impulses. We learn to not pick them up, give in to them, or believe them. All these efforts and this approach to try to live without harming are significant ways of loving.

So the questions are: “Where is the love? How can I love when there is a challenging situation?” An easy answer that is not always easy to implement is, “The love is found in the dedication to non-harming.” I would like to propose that this is a very important and central value. It is more important to adhere to non-harming than to somehow solve the challenges we have.

I will end with a story that the Dalai Lama tells. At some point in India, he met with a monk who had been in a Chinese prison camp for 20 to 25 years before being released. He was then able to come to India. When the Dalai Lama met with him, he asked the monk, “Were you ever in danger of violence or starving in the prison camp?” The monk’s answer surprised the Dalai Lama. The monk said: “Yes, I was in danger. I was in danger of losing my compassion for the prison guards.”

The greatest wealth, the greatest health, the greatest thing that the monk had was his compassion – his kind regard for not wanting to harm anyone. That was what he identified as being the most precious and important

part of who he was. Perhaps non-harming, more than anything, represents our greatest wealth, our greatest beauty, and our greatest home. It is one of the most wonderful places that life can radiate from. No matter what challenges we encounter, for a Buddhist, the love that doesn't want to harm should always be close by.

May we love the world through a dedication to non-harming. Thank you very much and I look forward to being here tomorrow.