

Love When It Is Hard (2 of 5) Reactive or Nurturing Love

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This is the second talk for this week's series on love in times of challenge. We have many physical, psychological, and mental systems operating within us. Some of these can work independently from each other, and some work together, but even some of the independent systems can cooperate. For people who can hear and people who can walk, those two functions can operate independently from each other, but they can also support each other. For example, while you are walking, hearing a car coming from behind you makes you safer as you walk.

Buddhism focuses on two primary systems. Buddhists most commonly describe them as “the wholesome and the unwholesome.” But I don't know if those terms really represent what happens for us inside, or what I want to

emphasize. I like to think of the two systems as “the protective and the nurturing,” or “the protective and the cultivating.”

The protective system is what reacts. In the reactive mode, if something dangerous happens suddenly, we have to act instinctively and quickly, reacting without thinking about it. But the reactive mode can operate when there is no immediate pressing danger, so sometimes what we’re reacting to is our own thoughts. Sometimes when I have been sitting quietly by myself, and I started to have a little fantasy, imagining some scene that turned out to be kind of dangerous, I could feel my system reacting to it. I would get tense and activated, and feel some alarm. The alarm was all a product of my imagination. It was not a real thing, but my system was reacting to the imagination.

Sometimes people end up living in a reactive, protective mode way too often, in such a way that the protective mode is not really protecting them. It is doing the opposite. That over-protection and overreacting – always being in the reactive mode – is phenomenally stressful for us, for our system. It has its role, but it can be overdone.

The other system is the nurturing one, the one that cultivates and allows something to grow and develop from the inside out. It nurtures the wholesome in us.

This system operates very differently. It doesn't react to anything. It wells up from within. We create the conditions for it – we create the ease. One reason to relax deeply and live with less stress is so this deeper system, the nurturing system, can operate best. The nurturing system sometimes has a lot of intelligence that can help us find our way through life's challenges in a very different way than the protective system, which tends to focus on the immediacy of things, and sees things through the lens of threat and fear, rather than through the lens of wholeness. The nurturing system is where love exists – the kind of deep, abiding, nurturing love that wells up from the inside and does not get entangled with the reactive system.

Sometimes what we call “love” is mostly in the world of reactivity. It is transactional love – love that maybe comes from feeling insecure. What we are really in love with is not a person, but we are searching for security in someone. Someone seems to provide security, and that is what we really want – the strong want for security, for children, for praise, and the strong want to be associated with someone who somehow builds up our sense of self. This is trying to find our way in the reactive mode, rather than allowing to well up from the inside the love that is not transactional, not looking to get something from someone else. Sometimes people “love others” because they are being loved. It is so meaningful to be loved that they are in love with being

loved more than they are in love with the other person. So love can be complicated when it is mixed up with the reactive mode.

But what we do when we can really relax deeply, and what Buddhism champions, is non-transactional love – love that does not need to get something from another person. This love has a number of beautiful qualities. It has a tremendous appreciation of others for who they are. It values others – it has a tremendous sense of the importance of the other person. There is a lot of respect for the other person. That respect also includes giving them their autonomy – letting them make their own choices and have their own independent life, not needing to fold their life into ours so that we feel safe or secure.

The primary characteristic of Buddhist love is goodwill, well-wishing – really wishing someone well. That well-wishing is not calculated well-wishing, but rather, just a nurturing feeling – as if you want to nurture this person. Maybe that is a little bit suffocating for some people – they feel too nurtured. But we just want the best for them, and we take delight in the possibility of them thriving and being well. This combination of respect, appreciation, valuing, wishing people well, and wanting to support the wellness in people is the constellation that is *mettā* (loving-kindness). That is the nurturing system.

So these two systems can operate together – they can be mutually supportive. But what happens when we're challenged is that some challenges trigger the reactive, protective system so strongly that it is the only one that is operating. This is fine if a mountain lion is attacking you. But it is not fine if you are going for a job interview in a month, and the whole month you're biting your fingernails, pacing around your room, and activated in a tense way. It is not healthy to live in that kind of reactive mode. To be hurt deeply and live in the reactive mode keeps us close to the hurt, and keeps us spinning in the reactive mode. This is also not healthy for us. To live solely in the reactive mode is not healthy.

When we are challenged, the important question I would like to propose is: "Where's the love? Can there be love here? Can there be kindness here? Where does kindness begin? Where do I find it?" We find some of the love in wanting it to be there. To want to have love, to want to have goodwill and *mettā*: that desire is profound. It is the beginning of love. Even if you can't do love in a conventional way, you are beginning to have it just by wanting it, by appreciating that wanting, and relaxing. As opposed to being in the transactional mode of wanting that depends on getting what we want, this love (*mettā*) is wanting and appreciating the inner wellspring from which it comes.

When you are challenged, notice if you are forgetting this whole other system: the nurturing system within. What can you do to tap into it? What can you do to let the nurturing system support you? How can you do self-care, and find ways to settle the reactivity, or put it aside enough so that the nurturing system has a chance to emerge as well? Maybe you can do something like going for a walk. Step away from the challenging things; spend time with a friend who makes you feel happy, so that you are not always caught in the realm of your challenge. Then you can come back to the challenge with this other mode available – the nurturing mode, the kind mode, the goodwill mode. Then your ability to engage in the challenge might be very different than when you are only living in the reactive mode.

This is a suggestion to strategically step away from our challenges when possible – when the mountain lion is not there. Meditation is one of the ways to step away from a challenge so we are not chronically thinking about it. Find some way to step away enough so it's not obsessing the mind. This allows something deeper to emerge from the inside – some sense of well-being, peace, calm, goodwill, and kindness. Look for the kindness. Sometimes it is enough to just ask: "What is the kind thing to do here? What would be the kind thing right now?" Inserting that in the middle of the swirl of challenges can contribute to having light appear in a

dark room. It can create space in a place that has been claustrophobic.

So, non-transactional love, non-transactional *mettā* and goodwill: what do you know about that? What do you know about love? How is your love for others mixed up with transactional love or with the reactive system? Is a clarification or purification of love possible when we dramatically quiet down the reactive mode? Keep asking: “What would be the kind thing here? What would be the supportive thing here?”

Finally, the nurturing mode, the kind mode, is one that wants the best for everyone involved – not just for oneself, not just for the other – believe it or not, even for the people who are our biggest challenge, even for the people who we might think of as our enemies. The goodwill mode has no boundaries for who deserves and does not deserve our basic goodwill.

I hope that you can take these words, reflect on them, think about them, and maybe have conversations with others about them. See if you can discover for yourself the nurturing, loving mode, and find out how it can become a greater resource for you. Don't let it atrophy. Thank you.