Love When It Is Hard (3 of 5) Love Without a Reason

March 15, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

activated, innate, kindness, challenges, goodwill, capacity, object, activation, friendliness, deactivate, innate capacity, heart, reactivated, quiet, practice, reactivation, compassion, *mettā,* loving-kindness

Gil Fronsdal

Hello everyone. For those of you who have been facing big weather challenges, I hope you're well. Life is full of challenges. I think, for many people, what being challenged means is to be a little bit activated, to be preoccupied or concerned more than just having a puzzle to solve. Puzzle challenges can be fun. It can be engaging and creative to engage the mind. Human challenges can be seen that way, but human challenges often come along with some ways in which we're activated – activated, reactivated. Something gets energized and stirred up.

That can often happen together with emotions. It can often be together with imagination – imagining where

this is going and what's going to happen if it continues. That activation or reactivation creates a certain mental focus or engagement. It engages muscles and all kinds of energies which, in a time of immediate crisis, are useful, perhaps. But in an ongoing way, these energies limit us and complicate our inner life. Some of our simpler, quieter innate capacities get drowned out.

One of those is our innate capacity to love. I use the word love here as a broad umbrella term for a wide family of human intentions, sentiments, and attitudes. Some of the words that I use are care, kindness, friendliness, goodwill – even respect, appreciation, and generosity. All these together belong to this family of love. They have to do with a positive attitude toward others or a positive toward anyone.

In Buddhism, we put a lot of emphasis on the practice of loving-kindness – of *mettā*, goodwill. One of the classic ways in which it's practiced is goodwill toward oneself. First, start there, and then people who are benefactors, friends, neutral people, and even enemies are included. We often call them difficult people rather than enemies. There's always an object for *mettā*.

But one of the profound things that can be discovered through insight practice – meditation practice, is that love, kindness, care, goodwill, and compassion can

exist without there needing to be an object. It can exist without there needing to be a reason to do it.

It's probably fair to say that, for most people, love is triggered by an object – something we adore, something we really value, something we really appreciate. Something that stirs our hearts, inspires us in some way, opens our hearts, and all this love and goodwill flows because the object is so wonderful. I know some people who, in doing loving-kindness practice to awaken that capacity, think of puppies, or of some other very cute, little animal that stirs them up in a nice way. But it's always with an object.

The miraculous thing is that, yes, we have a capacity for love, and that capacity does not require an object. Maybe it's easier with an object. That's partly because there's sometimes more energy around the love for an object. Then the object lives in relationship to *us*. We have a relationship to it that when our sense of self is pulled into it, somehow that often activates or stirs a whole ecology of things in addition to love. There's love as well. There's nothing wrong with having an object. But also, sometimes it's easy for our desires, aspirations, or dreams in relation to these particular people to be activated as well. Maybe it gives richness and depth to that love.

But it's possible to have kindness, care, and compassion without an object – without a person whom it's directed toward. If the heart and mind are settled enough here, we can feel and allow for the warmth of the heart – the warmth of the place that loves – to just shine and be unobstructed.

It's almost as if – maybe it's the case – that our capacity to love is often eclipsed through being activated by challenges, concerns, desires, and all that. The question is: how can we deactivate ourselves enough so that it's not eclipsed? So when we feel challenged, it's possible to remember: "Oh. I have this innate capacity for kindness, love, compassion. And it's not present right now."

And then, justification can come along: "Well, of course, it's not present. It's too dangerous right now." "Of course, it's not present. The person I'm with doesn't deserve it." "Of course, it's not present, because I'm justified in being angry. I'm justified in being filled with resentment because what happened was so horrible." "Of course, it's not present. I feel so hurt. So disappointed, so betrayed."

I would like to propose, without diminishing the fact that we do have these feelings of betrayal, hurt, or fear, that these feelings don't have to eclipse our capacity for love. In fact, if we allow them to eclipse it, it's too easy

for selfishness, conceit, and self-preoccupation to take over in a way that's actually not even healthy for us.

But if we can relax, deactivate, quiet down, and not become activated by our activation, maybe we can come back to a place where there can be some modicum of love or kindness. I'd like to think that the most fundamental capacity for love begins with the wish for someone's welfare, the intention for love, the wish to have kindness. In the middle of a challenge that doesn't require our full, one hundred percent attention to be safe, can we ask: Where's the love? Where's the kindness?

And if it's not available, take time to deactivate. Take the time to, maybe, go for a walk, meditate, talk with a friend, do something that you know how to do that lets your activated system calm down, quiet down a bit. Certainly, don't continue doing the very thing that keeps you activated and reactivated. Take time without aversion for the activation and without condemnation, but with the principle that we're looking and coming back to a simplicity of being in which basic goodwill, kindness, and friendliness have a chance to shine. That doesn't need a reason.

And because it doesn't need a reason, it has the capacity to shine its goodwill equally on everything. It can shine goodwill on our activation, on our anger, on

our sense of betrayal, on our hurt, on our enemies. Maybe we're disappointed with ourselves for not meeting a challenge. Maybe we made a mistake. But that simple kindness is there just to hold it all. All of who we are.

We have the capacity within for unconditional kind regard. We have the capacity within for unconditional goodwill, regardless of what's happened, regardless of what we've done, regardless of how we think about ourselves. This capacity should live within us – the capacity to love without a reason, without justification. It's the nature of the heart to love. It's a phenomenal thing.

So, where's the love? Where's the kindness? In the middle of a challenge, where is it? Just that question. Carrying that question with us might be enough for us to recognize little hints of the kindness that's there. But if there's none, it's probably an indication that what's important to do now is not to stay in the middle of being activated, but find some way to deactivate enough – "de-reactivate" enough, not to get caught in the cycles of activation and reactivation.

This is where meditation, mindfulness, come into play. This is where learning to relax comes into play. Relaxation is a skill we can become good at by practicing it. Then, come back to the challenge with

some kindness, some kind regard, some goodwill. So the challenge is not the only game in town. There's another game. There's another perspective. There's a perspective of love.

As you go through the day and you run into challenges, ask yourself the question: Where is the love? If it's not available, how are you activated? What can you do that's realistic and reasonable to deactivate enough so there's unconditional kindness – kind regard – for yourself and all things as you find your way with the challenge?

Thank you very much. I wish you well with this exercise of goodwill, kindness, and love. It's a very worthwhile thing to do.