

What is Love?

Preface

This book is suitable for anyone who wishes to attain their full potential for sharing love with another. If love is missing from your life, you will find many useful guidelines here for how to make it manifest.

The book's subtitle is 'The spiritual purpose of relationships'. This reflects the fact that the quest for love is part of our spiritual journey. Whether we know it or not, we are all spiritual beings, and the spiritual journey consists in removing the barriers that prevent us from fully realizing this.

Traditionally, in the East, this inner journey was undertaken alone, or within a monastic community. The traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, Zen and Yoga have developed many different guidelines for the spiritual path. One thing they have in common, however, is a recognition of the importance of awakening the heart as part of this journey. It is through the heart that we connect directly with the deepest sense of ourselves – our divine nature. The heart is the doorway to the divine, and it is through awakening the heart that we access the deeper layers of our spiritual nature.

The traditional way of doing this was mostly through the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion, through devotional practices such as chanting, and through the guru-disciple relationship. Relationships between men and women were not an acceptable part of this process. Women were seen as a distraction to men on the spiritual path, and monks were generally forbidden to spend time in their company. Most Buddhist monks and Hindu yogis have traditionally practiced celibacy.

There seems to have been two main reasons for this. Firstly, in Eastern cultures, the demands of a family life conflicted with the demands of the spiritual quest. Women were often financially dependant on their husbands, and family life – for both men and women – was seen as too time consuming to allow the spiritual seeker to follow a spiritual practice.

Another more unspoken reason was that young monks and yogis were not considered mature enough to deal with the potentially addictive pleasures of sex. Without sufficient self-discipline, there was a danger they would give in to the temptation to indulge. Indulgence creates a low energy state which is unsuitable for spiritual practice. Dealing with one's wandering mind in meditation was considered challenging enough, without having to handle the desires provoked by the presence of a female partner every time you stepped off the meditation cushion.

Within Eastern cultures, the celibate approach to spiritual life has worked reasonably well. Many in these traditions have attained to high levels of spiritual realisation. However, when teachers from Eastern cultures come to the West, they often show



themselves to be naïve and inexperienced in relating to women, and unable to handle the freedom of Western culture.

Within the traditional teachings there is almost no mention of how an intimate relationship can be part of the spiritual journey. Yet for many Westerners involved in spiritual practice, a relationship often continues to be a part of their life. This book has been written to bridge this gap between Western lifestyle and traditional teachings. Based on my own journey, my work with clients and students, and on teachings I have received from a variety of sources - both traditional and modern, these pages contain many insights and guidelines for awakening the heart within a relationship.

There are several very good reasons why including a relationship as part of the spiritual journey is particularly suited to people from the West.

Firstly, Westerners generally have more difficulty being open-hearted than people from the East. Eastern cultures are more heart-centred, and for a Buddhist monk living in a monastic community, the sense of belonging and connectedness are still very strong. The loneliness that is prevalent in the West is far less so in the East. Hence for Westerners, the cultivation of love and open-heartedness is a more necessary and challenging requirement.

Secondly, we in the West are more sexually liberated. In traditional Eastern cultures, the only way to enter an intimate relationship was to get married. This brought with it all the responsibilities of providing for one's wife and family. In the West, many different forms of relationship are now acceptable, and women are generally not a financial burden on the man. Men and women now enjoy a far greater freedom and independence within a relationship and, for Westerners, an intimate relationship need not be a distraction on the spiritual path.*

Finally, there is the fact that, in Eastern cultures, the spiritual quest was undertaken mostly by men. In the West, there are at least as many women interested in spirituality as there are men. This creates the possibility for a couple to support each other in their practice, and to share the journey together.

For all these reasons, I believe that the spiritual journey – the enquiry into our true nature – is enhanced by what we discover about ourselves as a result of being with someone else. This is what makes the sincere search for love in a relationship such a powerful spiritual practice.

Note regarding sexual orientation

The parts of this book dealing with sexuality are written from the perspective of a heterosexual relationship. The principles on which the book is based, however, are universal, and can be applied equally well to same-sex relationships.