

## LOVE

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, April 25th 2007

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Tonight what I want to talk about is love. When I thought of talking about it this evening it kind of surprised me that I hadn't talked about it before, because it's such an important part of most spiritual traditions—love is the epitome, really, of the spiritual life in most traditions.

In Buddhism, the more common English word that's used is compassion. In a lot of forms of Buddhism, the aim of the *bodhisatva* is to express wisdom and compassion in their actions, to act on behalf of other people to try to alleviate their suffering and bring them as well as oneself to enlightenment. In Christianity love is the word that's used, though in the Greek there's a lot of different words for love. Of course we can think of love in different forms—we're not talking about romantic love, although often love of God is compared to romantic love. We're certainly not talking about an obsessive kind of love, where the idea of love is you 'love' someone so much you want to control them, and insist that they be with you all the time or that kind of thing.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandments the answer that he either gave or approved of, depending upon the gospel that you read, was twofold. The first commandment being to love God with all your heart, your soul, your mind, and the second being “like it”: to love your neighbor as yourself. So I want to talk about love and what that means and some of the problems that come up with thinking about love, how to understand it and how to express it—it's a pretty big subject to tackle. [*laughs*] But this is my way of thinking about it this evening.

A problem that comes up in thinking about this response that Jesus gave or approved of, that we should love God with our whole heart, soul and mind and our neighbor as ourselves, first of all, for me, is the idea that this is a commandment. Because it would seem like you cannot *command* somebody to love; I mean, how do you expect someone to summon up love towards other people? An answer that you sometimes get is, 'well love is not simply a feeling,' even though you usually think of it as a feeling, feelings of goodwill toward people. It's got to be more than a feeling, right? So an answer that often comes is, 'well, you've got to *do* things for other people that express this goodwill, or express this love, otherwise it doesn't mean anything.' But then you have the further problem of, how do you express love toward God in actions? What does that mean—to express some kind of goodwill toward God or even generate goodwill toward God when God is invisible and hard to comprehend?

There's also a problem with the idea of just doing good actions on behalf of other people. The word charity also means love, but it's come to have bad connotations for people because nobody wants to be the recipient of charity. If love means doing good actions without some kind of a feeling behind it, of true sympathy and recognition of the other person's equality

with you, then it feels condescending. It doesn't feel right. You may be grateful if somebody gives you assistance and help, but if you have the sense they're doing it out of duty or a sense that this is what they're morally or religiously obligated to do, it doesn't have a good feeling for you. You don't feel a sense of connection with the person giving this charity to you; even though you may be grateful for what they're doing for you, it doesn't feel like love. An even more common response is not even gratefulness, it's kind of a muted resentment, which is why charity has a bad name in a lot of respects.

So it seems that there has to be some kind of a feeling that goes along with these actions on behalf of other people. There has to be the combination with this feeling of sympathy, of goodwill, of acknowledgement of the other person and a sensitivity to the other person's needs, because another problem with doing good to other people is that if you're doing something that *you* think is good for them but *they* don't really think it's good for them [*laughs*], it causes even more than resentment, it causes acrimony and bad relationships with people. Not only doesn't it feel like love, it sometimes feels like aggression or hostility or invasion when somebody wants to do things for you that you don't necessarily see as being something that you want them to do. There's that famous saying—I can't quite remember who, it's either Thoreau or Emerson—if he knew that his neighbor was coming to do a good work for him, or a good deed for him—do you know this saying, anyone? Anyway, what he said was something along the lines of, 'if I knew my neighbor was coming to do a good deed for me, or do good to me, I would run as fast as I could.' [*laughs*] Because you don't like it when somebody else decides to do good for you unless they have some kind of real, genuine sense of empathy with you, an understanding of who you are and what you need, and also a feeling of equality—that you're willing to accept something from them as well, to maintain that equality. It's not just a one-way street because that puts them in a lesser position.

So all these problems come in with the idea of expressing love in action, that there has to be these feelings behind it, or this sense of acknowledging the other person. What I want to do is use an analogy with being a musician in a band to play this idea out a little more, what is love and what does it mean to love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor as yourself, and also to tie it in with the ideas of wisdom and compassion being expressions of the aims of Buddhism, and bring it all together.

It's an old Christian metaphor to think of—this is usually talking about vocations—to think of life as people being in an orchestra. We each have our part to play in the orchestra; that's our vocation. And God is thought of as the conductor or the composer, giving each of us our part and then keeping us all together, keeping us in harmony and doing our part, and then when we're doing our part well and faithfully it all comes together. Now, people who aren't theistically inclined will have a problem with that, or even people who *are* theistically inclined, because we don't have an obvious set of sheet music in front of us to tell us what our part is, nor do we have God in some obvious way waving a baton in our face to keep us in time. So I prefer to think of our role in this band or this orchestra—don't think of it as an orchestra, think of it as an improvisational group. You don't need sheet music. You don't even need a conductor. What you need is, first of all, a real love of music and a familiarity with your instrument. You have to be practiced, and really have a feel for what you're doing.

And you also have to have a sympathy and a sense of accommodation with the other musicians. So you all can be doing your part well, it has to be that you're open to what they're doing so that as you improvise they're following along, and then you're giving them their chance to improvise and backing them up, and so on and so forth.

What I want to say about love for other people, is that it is like improvising with other musicians, in that you're finding your place where you can complement and harmonize with the other person. To offer something to them and they offer something back to you, in the same sense of playing music together you complement each other, and each person has something to offer to the overall sound that makes the experience for all of us something more fulfilling. But it takes a willingness to listen to the other person, to hear what they're playing, and even to accommodate yourself to their inadequacies. Now here's where it really comes in, the idea of charity and love, is when somebody is not a very good musician your role, really, is to make them look better, to make them feel comfortable with whatever their limited ability is. You play in such a way as to back them up and keep things simple enough, keep the tempo even enough and maybe slow enough, so they can keep with you, follow with you; keep the tune simple so they can find their place in it, without making them look bad. You're finding a way to work with that person's limitations—in some ways adding what's necessary for them to do their part well, in some ways listening to what they're doing and trying to encourage them on with your playing, in some ways inspiring them with your own example of playing. But it takes a great sensitivity to the other person to really know what's needed.

But it also takes a facility with your own instrument and your own musicianship. You have to practice a lot with your instrument; you have to know a lot of tunes to be able to find something that the other people can play along with. And you have to have a great love for and passion for music to be able to improvise and accommodate yourself to unexpected situations with other people. So what I want to say here, is that the commandment to love God with your whole heart, your whole soul, and your whole mind, is similar to saying love music with your whole heart, your whole soul, and your whole mind. That would mean practicing your spiritual life. On the basic level, fulfilling ethical precepts and living that kind of a life; that's the practice, right? The meditation, the prayer, the attempt to draw from within a source of inspiration is learning how to improvise. You find wisdom in scriptures and teachings and you try to take this into yourself, and then draw out of yourself the same type of wisdom when you express it. This is similar to learning to play music by practicing different pieces and then bringing it forth in improvisation when you're playing. So the spiritual life and loving God is really being ethical, practicing your prayer life, practicing your meditation, studying traditions of wisdom; taking all that into yourself and bringing it out of yourself in a more and more skillful fashion. And loving your neighbor as yourself, of course, is, as I said, accommodating yourself to their limitations, finding ways to help bolster their performance, and playing along with them.

A final thought on this whole analogy—well, maybe not a final thought, two final thoughts. One thing is that I said I'd tie it in with the Buddhist idea, and I think wisdom is this acting out of inspiration; it's when you really find that source of wisdom inside you that can guide you in your performance, in how you act. It comes from gradually finding that place and

becoming more skilled at expressing it; that's the wisdom side of it, expressing that in the same sense that as a musician you learn to become more and more skilled at performing and then practicing and expressing your ability to improvise. The compassion side, of course, is how you function with other people.

The final thought, then. What about people that aren't willing to play with you at all? What about people that would even take your instrument from you and destroy it? You know, difficult people, people that are not willing to be part of the orchestra, that see themselves as apart from it and don't appreciate it. I think with people like this the expression of love can only really mean producing your music as best you can with whatever you have, with whatever's given you, with whatever circumstance you find yourself in. If you're attacked, if you're deprived of something, whatever that happens to be, still finding a way to express that music of wisdom with that person, in the hopes that eventually they'll hear that music coming from you, and they'll feel the draw of it, and the desire that everyone has somewhere in their heart to be able to produce that music, will be kindled.

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